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"HE LINGERED FOR A MOMENT, HIS HAND ON THE MARE'S NECK."

## Leap Year; or, Why She Proposed.

BY SARA CLAXTON.

### CHAPTER I.

ANGELICA AND HER RELATIVES.

"Do come away from that cold corner of the room, Angelica! Wilfred and Harry will not get home a moment sooner if you watch at the window till it grows quite dusk!"

"I am coming directly, Laura," answered Angelica, a tall, slender, dark-haired girl, with eyes of such wondrous brightness and beauty, that they alone would have made her singularly attractive.

"Your tea will be cold, and I shall not have a moment with you to discuss our proposed dinner party, if you do not come at once!" pursued Laura, the elder sister.

Angelica furtively dashed away two tears which sought to force their way down her lovely cheek; then she left her station by the wide bow window where she had been watching the trees wave their branches in the wind, and, advancing up the long room, sat down beside her sister.



"That's right!" exclaimed Laura, settling herself for a comfortable chat. "Now who shall be invited for next week—or, rather, who shall we ask to make up our number?"

"Miss Dyton?" suggested Angelica, with her thoughts far away, a fact she successfully concealed.

"No, no!" said Laura. "At least, I don't wish to ask her! Because, of course, Harry will invite the parson and his handsome nephew, and you know what they say of Miss Dyton, Angelica!"

"No, I do not!" smiled the girl. "Why may she not come here to dine with—with our clergyman and Mr. Seymour Cranleigh?"

"Because they say Miss Dyton means to propose to Seymour Cranleigh!" cried Laura.

A momentary silence succeeded, during which Angelica's beautiful cheeks became suffused with a quick blush. She was shocked at the very idea propounded by her sister.

"You are frightened at such a notion!" cried the elder sister, Laura, with a laugh; "but let me tell you, such things are done—sometimes!"

"But I don't believe Miss Dyton would do so," breathed Angelica, softly, recovering herself.

"Why shouldn't she?" asked Laura. "Undoubtedly Seymour Cranleigh is exceedingly handsome—as handsome as he is poor! And, you see, *she* is rich—very well off, indeed, and an old maid—that is to say, she must be quite five-and-thirty!"

Another blush, still more vivid, swept over Angelica's fair brow. But she said, very quietly, to her sister, "I don't think it is at all fair for us to take for granted that—that Miss Dyton so much as wishes to marry Mr. Seymour Cranleigh, or any one! But if she does, I am sure—quite sure, Laura, that she would never make a proposal of that kind—to a gentleman!"

"What a baby you are, my dear! But, then, you are barely eighteen, and I am six-and-twenty! However, you yourself must see that the lady in question certainly wishes to attract Seymour Cranleigh! He is ten years her junior, but I really can't imagine what better he could do, now that he has lost his money by that bank failure! So, after all, I think I shall invite both; it will be so very amusing, you know, to watch how the game goes on!"

"Oh, Laura, that is not noble—not dignified!" cried Angelica.

"Nonsense! And there are Wilfred and Harry! I enjoy this time before dinner more than any other hour in the day, I think—that is, when we have no visitors, and can be merry together."

The door opened at this moment, and a broad-shouldered young man, of a good height, looked into the room.

"Are you there, girls?" said he.

"Yes. Come and have a cup of tea," cried Laura.

"All right. Let me get off this shooting-coat first."

And then the door was closed, and the speaker walked away whistling.

While Angelica and her sister are waiting for his re-appearance, we will briefly explain that they and their two brothers, of whom Wilfred, the eldest, was thirty, lived together at a very pretty country residence, bequeathed to him by his father, who had been six years in his grave; and the family now installed at Riversmead, Wilfred's property, consisted of the quartette of the two brothers and their sisters.

It was a harmonious household. There were no quarrels, and, each being well portioned, lack of means was never felt. Perhaps the only anxiety experienced in this prosperous house was the fact that Wilfred must be expected to marry some day, when this happy home would be broken up. But even for this emergency there was a provision. There was another pretty country residence, now let, but belonging to the youthful Angelica, and to

this place, named Cedargrove, the others would migrate when Wilfred at last found a wife.

Since, then, this happy family had no cares, what was it that made Angelica brush the tears away secretly when Laura called her from the window? Ah, that will be seen in due place! At present nobody suspected that she ever had a disposition to shed tears. Smiles alone were expected from her, and so Angelica tried to smile on every suitable occasion.

"Here they come!" exclaimed Laura, as her brothers' footsteps were heard again approaching, and almost the next moment the two young men entered, both tall, good-looking, and of gentlemanly bearing.

"We had capital sport," said Wilfred, sitting down by his elder sister. "And what, may I ask, have you and Angelica been doing all day?"

"All sorts of things," said Laura, becoming still more animated at the entrance of her brothers. "We drove to Ridgely, for one thing, and met that Miss Dyton with her new ponies. Wilfred, don't you think I am right in believing she is trying to catch Seymour Cranleigh?"

"Little doubt of it!" laughed the young man. "My own belief is that she will propose to him under the cover of it being Leap Year."

"Just what I said, only I didn't think of Leap Year," said Laura, merrily.

"I had no idea of a wedding impending," smiled Harry Seale, the younger brother. "Well, as far as riches go, Cranleigh will be a lucky fellow."

"She hasn't proposed yet, you know," remarked Wilfred. "He may forestall her when he feels on safe ground."

"No, he will not. His creed is that poor men ought not to seek rich wives. He said so quite decidedly one day in Lady Lowmoor's drawing-room. Miss Dyton must have heard him, for she was close by, I remember, so she will have to ask the momentous question herself. However, Wilfred, here is the list of the people we expect next week. Just see if you would like to ask any one else."

Wilfred ran his eyes over the names, and almost immediately handed it back to Laura, remarking, in an undertone, "Ask young Mynfayre and his sister."

"Oh, of course! I did not know they were at home again," answered Laura, quickly.

"They came back last night," replied Wilfred.

Though these last sentences were exchanged in a low voice, while Harry was talking to Angelica, the latter had caught the name "Mynfayre," and she felt an uncomfortable sensation at once of embarrassment and indignation.

She was persuaded, though nothing direct had been said to her by her relatives, that they had selected this gentleman as the person they hoped she would marry; and Angelica, with her whole heart, silently rebelled against this disposal of her hand. It was not of *him* she was dreaming when the hot tears coursed down her cheeks. She said nothing, however, and tried to listen calmly to her younger brother's talk about the miles of ground he and Wilfred had traversed that day, and how many birds and rabbits they had bagged.

"There is the bell for dressing! How late it is!" cried Laura, jumping up. "When you boys come in I forget everything!"

"There is a compliment—from one's sister, too!" laughed Wilfred, as Angelica, with a smothered sigh of relief, followed Laura out of the room.

## CHAPTER II.

### MISS DYTON AT HOME.

FOLLOW me, while I introduce you to another interior—an interior not very much unlike that of the one we have just taken a glance at. We have not to travel far—only a couple of miles beyond the broad belt of woodland which bounds Wilfred's country estate. For here it

is that Miss Dyton lives, that lady of five-and-thirty who was supposed to be so ready to share her all with Mr. Seymour Cranleigh, the needy, handsome nephew of the incumbent of the parish.

Is it indeed so, or has Miss Dyton been unjustly accused? As she sits alone by the fire in her pretty boudoir, we may, perchance, learn something of the real state of things, for she is in a fit of deep musing, and allows some words to escape her in the warmth of her feeling. They are but few, and yet they predispose us to say candidly that we very much fear Laura Seale has judged correctly.

"It would be dreadful if he rejected me, and yet I think if I could muster courage enough to make him aware—"

Here Miss Dyton relapsed into musing, as she gazed intently into the fire, without consciousness, for the time, of any of her own luxurious surroundings. That she was debating within herself an important question no one who had observed her could for a moment doubt.

Suddenly she rose from her seat, and paced the apartment as if moved by some keen agitation, then sunk again upon the couch, and covered her face with her hands, murmuring, "If I do it at all, it should be done to-day—to-day, which is the surplus day Leap Year gives us. This is the twenty-ninth of February. A sort of permission to take the initiative is given to us women at such a time—at least, so it is said."

For full five minutes she remained motionless, her face hidden, as she bent over the table near her. Then, as if seized with sudden resolution, she started up, drew pen and paper before her, and began to write rapidly. Her handsome face flushed and grew pale as she traced the lines, her white and shapely hands were tremulous, but when once Constance Dyton had resolved upon a thing she was not one to draw back. When she had finished her note she rung the bell.

"Take these to their addresses, Hinton, immediately after dinner," said she to the servant who entered.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Hinton, cheerfully.

Hinton was Miss Dyton's head man, and so much of this story is involved in his action that he must have a word of description here. An oldish man of about sixty, very tall, singularly hale and vigorous, looking ten years younger than his real age, and a most devoted servitor of his mistress. It was Hinton who had taught her to ride, who had watched with anxiety when the then tiny girl, Miss Conny, had taken her first fence. He had lived with her father, and now was in her service. Many of his family had taken service in the Dyton family, and Hinton felt as much interest in Miss Dyton's affairs as any of her relatives. Was she really about to throw herself and her fine fortune away on a poor parson's nephew? He hoped not, but he, too, had eyes and ears, and certainly was convinced, in his own mind, that Mr. Seymour Cranleigh might have Dyton Lodge and all that went with it for the asking. Nay, more, rumor said that he would have it without the asking—that it would be offered for his acceptance.

And now, as Hinton received his mistress's directions, and noted the address of one of the letters she had given him, he had an uncomfortable foreboding that it was his hand which was destined to carry the fatal missive. Else why was she so agitated when she spoke the few simple words in which she gave her order? She was agitated; her voice was tremulous; her face was pale; though she attempted to seem as if all was as usual.

Still the letters must be taken to their destination. Hinton had no idea of not executing his commission. But he paused a moment in the corridor to read the addresses on the envelopes.

"Hum!" mused he. "A blind, I fear, her sending these other two. One to Mrs. Grove—tother to J. Minny, Esq. This is the one she really wants taken—'Seymour Cranleigh, Esq.'"



Oh, dear—oh, dear! And she so well-looking and rich, who might marry a'most anybody! Thirty-five isn't forty-five!"

With which reflection Hinton carried the letters to his room till he could start on his errand.

"I wonder if I have judged her right or wrong," thought the old man, as he handed to his mistress that evening with all due gravity, the different dishes during the dinner. But before the meal was over Hinton had quite decided that he was right in his suspicions.

Miss Dyton ate nothing; she was nervous, and rose from table much earlier than her wont.

And Hinton had judged correctly. This was the missive which his mistress had written to Seymour Cranleigh:

"DEAR MR. CRANLEIGH:

"I hope you will not think I have sent you this letter without much deep consideration. Naturally a good deal of reluctance and pain accompanies this step I am venturing on, for it is a cruel thing for a woman to take the initiative, but I trust that in some cases it is pardonable.

"We have known each other now for some years, and though I am fully aware I may deceive myself, yet your kindness, your courteous friendliness on all occasions toward me, and your opinion so lately expressed in my hearing that a man without means had no right to seek a rich wife—all combine to urge me to have the courage to ask you plainly if you could be happy with me for your life-companion? If so, you will surely not sacrifice the happiness of two lives from a mistaken estimate of the value of wealth.

"I will not add a word more, for the purport of this note will testify my deep regard for you.

"I remain, my dear Mr. Cranleigh,

"Yours sincerely and affectionately,  
"CONSTANCE DYTON."

So here we perceive the true state of the case. Hinton, bearing this important communication, left the under-footman the task of clearing the dining-room, and started on his errand.

He duly delivered Miss Dyton's note at Mrs. Grove's, and Mr. Minny also received his epistle; the Parsonage, where Seymour Cranleigh was staying (as he so often did), was a quarter of a mile further on. This quarter of a mile lay in the hollow of the road, and was very lonely.

No habitation bordered the route save one house, a good-sized dwelling, half cottage, half villa, which had for years been untenanted. It was the house in the neighborhood which would not let. People came to look at it, but never took it. The owner talked of pulling it down, and building something which would let, but the months slipped by without any thing being done, for besides that funds were wanting, the landlord was a very dilatory man.

And now, as Hinton traversed this part of the way, he walked slowly, musing on his mistress's affairs. He was not thinking of the empty house (now just in sight), when suddenly, in the gloom of evening (it was now nine o'clock), he saw a sight which made him start—a light, which appeared for one instant in the disused cottage.

A light—or rather a gleam of light—appeared and disappeared, as if some one had struck a match which showed its ray for an instant, and brought into view the outline of a window. It was all over in a moment; but Hinton came to a halt, as if thunderstruck.

Somebody in the empty house! Who was it? What was any one doing there?

The old man had plenty of courage. He soon resolved to solve the mystery, if possible; and, creeping forward, stole in by the garden gate (off its hinges and always open now), and slid toward that particular window whence the light had come.

But there was no sound or movement issuing from the lonely dwelling. All was dark—all was silent. "Still, there is somebody there, or there was a minute or two ago!" thought Hinton. "I'd give something to know who!"

Like his mistress, he was resolute on occasion, and instead of pursuing his way, lingered in the mournful garden, eying the casements, which were broken in some parts, and shutterless. And as he watched, once more that gleam of light struck across one of the win-

dows. Hinton climbed in a moment onto a broken foot-ladder, which had leant against the wall for months past, and grasping an end of projecting pipe, peered within. But at that instant the light was extinguished, and all was dark and silent as before.

Hinton watched the window long after this strange incident, but in vain.

His curiosity was strongly excited. Could he have disposed freely of his own time, he would have watched on till midnight. But, when the clock struck the quarter to ten, he reluctantly made up his mind to quit the place, and to make a survey of it on the following day.

And then another sort of anxiety seized him. He no longer had the letter for Mr. Cranleigh.

In springing to the window, or, rather, in grasping the pipe, it must have slipped from his hand.

"It must be at my feet, surely," thought he, groping all around beneath the window.

But no; he could not find it. Here was a dilemma.

The faithful old servant felt sorely distressed.

It struck ten—it struck half-past ten, and still he groped about in vain.

Then, abandoning his search in the dark, he ran to the nearest cottage, woke up the inmates, procured matches and an end of candle, and returned to the spot.

His search was renewed with care, but no sight of the letter rewarded it.

Again he climbed to the broken window, and easily effected an entrance; but the lost article was not within the empty room.

"I'd have given any thing rather than it should have happened!" ejaculated poor Hinton. "I'll be here by dawn, and search again, and to-night I'll not say a word, for mistress wouldn't rest in her bed if 'tis what I think that she wrote."

Most unwillingly he turned his steps homeward, for he knew that the footman would not go to bed till he came in; besides, there was the house to see properly secured for the night.

It was past eleven o'clock before he reached Dyton Lodge, where he found surprise had been already created by his lengthened absence.

"I have been detained, Hicks," was all he said in explanation, "and I have some business to see to for Miss Dyton which will call me out before breakfast, so that you must take care all is in readiness as usual."

"Yes, sir," replied the under-footman.

Miss Dyton had retired at half-past ten. She was far from expecting a reply to so important a communication the same evening; besides, she believed that Mr. Seymour Cranleigh was dining out that evening, as she was aware that there was a dinner-party not far off to which the clergyman and his nephew would probably be invited. So much the better. Let Seymour read her proposal in the hush of night, when the bustle of the day was over. In those moments of calm he could better consider the dictates of his heart. And so she slept, though in a troubled way, wishing more than she would confess to herself, now that the deed was done, that she could recall it; for, now that it was accomplished, the difference of age assumed its true proportion. Seymour might be already in love with some young girl. How natural that he should be! Oh, that she could now prevent him from perusing the words she had written!

Cold and gray dawned the morrow, and, with returning light, Hinton was at the empty cottage.

Surely, now, he would discover the lost letter? But no; without a doubt it was gone. Had it been carried off by the unknown person who struck the light?

Poor Hinton was quite overwhelmed, when he at length became convinced of this. He sat down on a wooden block within the comfortable room he had entered, and, leaning his

head on his hand, groaned out aloud, "And I'll wager she'd asked him to marry her! Oh, my poor mistress! She trusted the proposal to me!" The old man was quite overcome, and again exclaimed, in the heat of his feelings, "She must have proposed to him to marry her! If she hadn't written *that* to him I could have confessed to her I'd lost the letter!"

And then Hinton rose, and went on with his hopeless search, till it grew so late that he was forced to turn his weary steps toward Dyton Lodge.

The morning sped on, luncheon time arrived and passed, and poor Hinton could hardly ask his mistress at what hour she wished the carriage to come round.

"I shall not drive to-day, Hinton," said she.

The old man, glancing at her, thought she looked pale and troubled.

About an hour afterward he saw her pacing up and down in the grounds in one of the paths called "The Long Walk." He watched her with grievous sadness at heart.

"What's to be the end of this?" said he to himself. "I ought to go and tell at once what happened last night; but I can't—not just yet."

The Long Walk communicated with the road; for, sweeping round, the promenade led to a wicket-gate, giving a short cut to the village. Miss Dyton had taken her third turn down this pathway, asking herself for the thousandth time since this morning why she received no reply to her note to Seymour Cranleigh, when she caught sight of that gentleman himself, advancing to meet her. He had come in by the wicket-gate. For once, Constance Dyton was thoroughly unnerved. What did his presence there mean? Could it be interpreted in any way but one? For, surely, if he intended to reject her proposal, he would have written that rejection. He would spare her the pain of hearing it from his own lips!

She almost stood still upon the path as he came on. How strange his demeanor for an eager lover! He hardly quickened his pace, and as he neared her, her timid glance showed her his face—calm, composed, no whit embarrassed.

"How do you do, Miss Dyton?" said he, raising his hat, and then quietly shaking hands. "You see I took the liberty of entering your grounds by the wicket-gate, since my uncle told me you permitted free ingress to the people of the Parsonage."

"Certainly," murmured she, her heart beating fast and painfully.

"It is a great convenience, and I was glad to avail myself of it to-day, for I have made two rash promises this morning; one of which was to leave this note for you from my uncle—some parish matter; the other, that I engaged to be at Fairside by four o'clock. I have redeemed one promise, and hope to be able to keep both, if I make haste."

"Oh, yes; you will have time," stammered the lady, in a choked voice, hardly knowing what she said. They were walking on slowly, side by side, during these remarks, Constance saying to herself, in a stunned, bewildered way, "What does he mean? what can he mean? Has his uncle written the answer? Is he come here to show his indifference?—is he so heartless?"

"What a pleasant day! I shall enjoy my long walk!" continued the gentleman. "Is there not a short path across Firwood plantation? I forgot to ask my uncle, but he was saying something about it yesterday."

Miss Dyton only just managed to reply "that it was certainly shorter—yes, a good deal shorter, by Firwood." (If this was his way of intimating that he declined her offer, it was a very cruel way!)

"Your garden looks beautiful for the first of March, Miss Dyton," continued Mr. Cranleigh, glancing round him at the gay beds of crocuses and the double snowdrops. "What a wealth of early flowers you have here!" added he, admiringly looking down at some aconites.



Constance nearly burst into tears.

"I shall hope you will allow me to call to see your green-house next week. My uncle tells me the show of azaleas is quite beautiful," Mr. Cranleigh went on. "To-day I am compelled to hurry on to Fairside." And he raised his hat, and stayed his steps, in order to take leave.

As in a dream, Miss Dyton mechanically extended her fingers. Mr. Cranleigh shook hands cordially in his usual manner, and the next instant was walking briskly away toward the high road.

When he had left her, she sunk upon the nearest bench, and burst into tears. It was impossible to delude herself into the belief that his conduct had been actuated by affection. A calm, friendly courtesy, undisturbed by the slightest agitation, had marked his manner throughout their short interview.

"He was as self-possessed, as indifferent, as if he had never received my letter!" thought she; "but that he must have done, surely! I must question Hinton. Hinton may have left it as I directed, but it may not have been given to Seymour Cranleigh. It may still be lying unopened on one of the tables at the Parsonage!"

A little composed by this supposition, she dried her eyes, and with trembling fingers opened the note Seymour had just brought. It was from the clergyman, about a parish matter, as Seymour had said; not a word, not a hint about her letter of last night.

Hastily rising, Miss Dyton carefully adjusted her veil over her face (which she was aware still bore traces of agitation), and after another turn on the path, returned to the house, and entering the library, rung the bell.

"I want to speak to Hinton," said she to the servant who appeared at her summons.

Hinton was a long time in coming; in the interval she glanced round at the beautiful room, and out through the windows at the fair lands belonging to her, and thought, with a sigh, that the offer of such a domain at least deserved a reply.

At last Hinton's step was heard, and the old servant advanced into the room, slowly.

"I want to ask you if you delivered my letter at the Parsonage yourself last night, or if you sent it by one of the footmen?" said his mistress.

He made no reply. Miss Dayton repeated her question, and still obtaining no answer, looked with surprise at Hinton, who was pale, and unlike himself.

"What is the matter? Are you ill, Hinton?" cried she.

"Oh, ma'am, I ought to have told you before, I know—but I did so trust to find it! I lost one of the letters you gave me to deliver—the one that was to go to the Parsonage!"

"Lost it!" almost shrieked Miss Dyton.

"I'll tell you how, ma'am! I had it in my hand, and never thought to let it drop; but 'twas seeing a light in the empty house at that time of night made me climb up by the water-pipe to see who could be there, and the letter slipped down. Oo, ma'am, I searched till high eleven o'clock last night, and as soon as 'twas light this morning, but it was gone!"

Constance fell back on a lounge.

"Lost it!" she cried out, in accents pierced with agony. And then she burst anew into tears. Hinton was almost as much distressed as herself. He understood how dreadful it would be, if the letter indeed contained an offer of marriage, that it should be read by any other than him for whom it was intended. Why, his mistress might be whispered about with a smile all over the county.

"Oh, Hinton!" exclaimed Miss Dyton, starting from her seat. "find it, I beseech you! That letter was of the last importance! Oh, find it—find it! How could I foresee what would happen?"

"I'll find it if it is to be found, ma'am! I'll go now, and dig into the mold where I dropped it last night. Maybe I've trampled it in," said Hinton.

"Yes; go, go! Only first tell me a little more! You say there was a light in that empty house? If so, somebody was there—some stranger has got my letter! Hinton, if it cannot be found, I shall never be happy again!"

"I'll find it if it be possible," repeated the man; and went out, more perfectly convinced than ever of what that letter had contained.

And very anxious he was to regain it; but he did not go to dig round the empty house, knowing full well that it would be useless; but he went in a contrary direction, toward a trim cottage, which he entered without knocking, whose inmate—a stout man, singularly like himself, and somewhat younger—greeted him with an easy smile, saying, "Well, Tom?"

"William," answered Hinton, "I've lost a letter of consequence; will you help me to find it—you and your boy?"

"Ay, that we will!" answered the other, heartily.

And then Hinton detailed to his brother (who had set up in a small way as a florist some years since) his unpleasant adventure of last night, concealing nothing save his firm belief that the lost letter contained an offer of marriage.

"But, for the life of me, Tom," said the florist, "I can't see how you're to get it again."

"'Tis a chance—a mere toss up, I know, Will," replied Hinton; "but, you see, whoever 'twas in the empty house last night, may happen to come there again to-night. Now if we three could watch, and be down upon him, we'd get the letter without much ado—that is, if it was with the man that picked it up."

The florist whistled, then exclaimed, "Ah, now I see!"

It was agreed between the brothers that at nightfall they would secrete themselves in the garden of the lonely house, and seize any one who might emerge from or enter it, and search him for the letter.

"It's just a chance," remarked both. "Miss Dyton thinks I'm digging in the mold to find it; but, bless you, it's not in the ground—it's in that man's pocket! He may be a tramp for aught we know. I'm vexed enough with myself, I can tell you!"

"If 'twas a tramp, he'll hardly come back there to-night; he'll be gone on somewhere," replied William Hinton.

"We'll watch, all the same," rejoined the other.

And thus it happened that, as dusk crept down over the landscape, three men—the two Hintons and the florist's son, a young fellow of one-and-twenty—crept into the garden of the deserted dwelling, and waited there.

### CHAPTER III.

#### HE AND SHE.

SEYMOUR CRANLEIGH, unconscious of the part he played in the matters just related, pursued his way to Fairside that afternoon, stayed there half an hour or so, and then started homeward at a quick pace. It was pleasant in the meadows that March day. Birds chirped, the sun seemed ready to smile out, the air was sweet, the wind frolicked with the yet bare branches; and had the young man not been absorbed by some deep feeling, he would have opened his heart to the life of nature around him.

His thoughts, however, were not with the birds and the woodland he skirted, but with a love that he counted lost, and the future which lay before him.

"I ought never to have come here again! I might have known how it would be with me if I but once more saw her!"

Such was the thought haunting him as he vaulted over a stile, and gained the high road.

The sight his eyes met brought him to a momentary standstill. The next instant he hastened forward. By the roadside a slender girl, in a riding-habit, was holding the bridle of two horses, while a man, evidently the groom who

had escorted her, lay helpless on the ground. The girl was she whose image had so filled his heart—Angelica Seale.

His step made her look up.

"Oh, Mr. Cranleigh," cried she, "how fortunate that you came this way! Ward's horse took fright, and unseated him. I am in such distress, for I fear he may be seriously hurt."

Cranleigh went down on his knees by the side of the wounded man, unloosed his collar, raised his head, speaking meanwhile reassuring words to Angelica. These hopeful presages of his were happily borne out by the groom drawing a long sigh, opening his eyes and speaking.

"Where am I? Oh, it's you, sir!"

"Yes. Are you hurt?"

"Not much, sir, I think. Let me get up."

"Lie still a moment longer."

Then Seymour hastened to relieve Angelica of the charge of the groom's horse, tying the animal to a gate not far off.

"Now, then, let me help you up," said he, returning to Ward.

"Thank you sir," replied the man, staggering to his feet. "I don't believe I'm much hurt, but I think I'd best not try to ride back, don't you, sir?"

"Certainly I do! I'll help you to that cottage yonder, and no doubt Miss Seale will send something to bring you back," replied Seymour.

Another twenty minutes, and the unhorsed man was resting in the wayside cottage, and Seymour was standing beside Angelica in the quiet country road. She still held her mare's bridle, and stood by the other horse.

"It is my happy fortune," said Seymour, coming up, "to be permitted to escort you home. When I started this afternoon for Fairside, I little supposed that such great happiness was in store for me."

"You are too kind, to make so little of the trouble I am giving you!" murmured she, her fair face suffused with blushes. For well she knew, though no direct word had told her so, that Seymour worshiped her, and he and she were all alone in the soft, sweet hour of coming twilight.

"Let me assist you to mount," said he, coming to lift her into the saddle.

When he had replaced her there, he lingered for a moment, his hand on the mare's neck, gazing fondly and earnestly at Angelica.

"Do you remember what happened one day, nine years ago?" he said.

"So many things have happened in nine years," faltered she, while her blushes deepened.

"Yes; but one day stands out forever in my memory," he replied. "You were only nine years old then—hardly that, indeed—and I was a big fellow of fifteen; and jumping a ditch, I came upon a group of children—you among them—and you had sprained your ankle, and could not walk home. Then I petitioned to be allowed to carry you, and you said I might try. How I have treasured that happy day in my heart! You chatted to me all the way to the house, your dark curls resting on my shoulder."

Deeper and deeper had grown the rose tint on Angelica's fair features, investing the young girl with exquisite beauty. She did not turn away from Seymour, as she would have done, perchance, had their positions been reversed, and he had possessed her wealth, while she was poor. So, with her dark lashes shading her cheek, she listened patiently to Seymour's recollections, showing no impatience to be gone.

"Do you remember, Angelica—I may for this once call you so again, mayn't I, as I used to do before you were grown up?—do you remember all the things you promised me as a reward for carrying you home?"

Angelica laughed a forced laugh, which did not conceal her embarrassment.

"I think I promised you all sorts of things," replied she. "I know I undertook that you should have all the flowers in the garden, all the fruit in the hot-house, and the house itself,



all of which belonged to Wilfred, or would do."

"And something else, too, you promised when you should be a tall girl, as tall as Laura! I have remembered your very words, you see."

Then Angelica did turn away, in deep confusion, for well she recalled that she had promised him—herself. And a great joy leapt up in her young heart. Was he now, at last, about to speak the words which would permit her to rejoice in her love for him? He had so often expressed, or hinted in her presence, his detestation of men who were poor themselves presuming to marry rich women, that Angelica had long since told herself that though he loved her—of that she felt assured—she would never be blessed by hearing an avowal of that affection. No, she would have to die without it.

Of one thing, however, she was completely convinced. She would live and die unmarried, unless she wedded Seymour Cranleigh. It did not occur to this young lady, even though it was Leap Year, even though an avowal of affection for her had trembled on his lips—it did not occur to her that she should hint to him that if he proposed for her hand he would not be rejected.

There had been silence between the young pair for the last minute, during which Seymour still had his hand caressingly on the neck of Angelica's mare. Now he moved that hand, and took one of hers.

"You will think of me sometimes, won't you, Angelica, when I am gone?"

Angelica gave no reply in words. She had been aware that he was to go somewhere, at some time; but the mention of a final departure was too much for her composure.

Another embarrassing silence succeeded, which was broken by Angelica.

"I think we ought to ride on," said she.

Then he drew her hand forward, and pressed his lips to it, released it with a sigh, mounted the groom's steed, and they began their homeward ride together.

The soft gray sky was growing more dusky every moment, and the young girl's soul was full of love, of rapture in the thought of his affection, and yet of hopelessness.

She was persuaded that he would never declare his love, because he was well-nigh penniless now, and was compelled to seek for fortune in some of our colonies. For his family, unfortunately, had lately lost a large inheritance, and times were greatly changed since he and she had played together as children; when Seymour came from time to time to visit his uncle, the then rich incumbent of the village near Riversmead. Now all that uncle had to depend on was the stipend from the living, and about fifty pounds a year of private property.

We must forgive Angelica if, as she rode homeward side by side with him she loved so devotedly, she thought the eternal barrier of the silence enjoined on her as a lady was a very hard thing for her to bear.

She could have cried out, "Oh, Seymour, Seymour! we shall be so unhappy apart, and I have enough for both!—oh, so much more than enough!"

But, as I have said, it would have been impossible for her to put such feelings into actual words, and she accepted the inevitable with a courage equal to her pain.

All the greater part of a mile they rode before a word was said by either. Then Seymour exclaimed, passionately, "Where I shall be this day a year hence, I am yet wholly ignorant! But let me have the comfort of believing that you will hold me in your thoughts for that one day."

"Oh, yes!" she answered; and he knew that a tear choked her utterance.

He dared not trust himself to speak again till they reached the park entrance to Riversmead.

Angelica tried to rally a little, and made several remarks, which he replied to at random; and then the lodge-keeper's wife came

out to open the gate for them, and a few moments later they cantered up to the house.

"You will come in and take tea, Mr. Cranleigh, and tell Laura about my misadventure?" said Angelica, softly, as Seymour helped her to dismount.

"Thank you; yes, I will come in and see your sister, and pray make me of any use about the groom. You will have to send for poor Ward; but, fortunately, his hurt is not serious; at least, I believe not."

"Miss Seale is in the library," said the servant who admitted them.

Angelica gave some hurried orders concerning a carriage to fetch Ward, and then led the way to the library. It was a long room, bright as lamps and a cheerful fire could make it. But Laura was not there.

"My sister will be here directly, I am sure," murmured Angelica. "I suppose she came in late to-day, or she would be here to offer you some tea. Let me give you a cup, Mr. Cranleigh."

She was making a great effort to appear at ease, as if she had forgotten their late interesting conversation. Suddenly he approached her.

"Angelica," said he, seizing her hand, "do me a great favor. Let me hear you once more—for the last time—call me *Seymour*."

She left her hand in his, and essayed to do as he had entreated; then, all at once lifting her lustrous eyes, in which two tears sparkled, she whispered, "Yes, Seymour, those were happy days when we were children."

"Oh, if they could return!" said he, fervently kissing the hand clasped in his. "But you will think of me wherever I may go in my wanderings, won't you, Angelica, dearest?"

"Always," she murmured, not withdrawing her fingers from his clasp.

And then the handle of the door turned, and Laura came in with a smiling, courteous welcome.

"How do you do, Mr. Cranleigh? How good of you to bring my sister back, and how fortunate you came to her help! The servant has told me thus much, and that Angelica has already given directions about a carriage being sent for poor Ward. Wilfred will be so glad to see you. Can you stay till he comes in? He will not be long."

And thus the lovers' delightful interview ended. But could the remembrance of it be ever blotted from their hearts? Never!

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### MISS DYTON RECEIVES A SURPRISE.

We must go back an hour or two of this eventful day, and once again peep into the tasteful boudoir of the mistress of Dyton Lodge. Gone from her handsome face is the trembling agitation, so mixed with hope, of yesterday. All repose has fled from her, and sharp anxiety has taken up his reign. The letter—the lost letter is not an instant absent from her mind.

A knock at the door, and a footman enters, bearing a small salver, on which a bijou china tea-service is placed. He deposits it by his mistress, saying, respectfully, "If you please, ma'am, there is a person below who begs to see you. He says his name is Case."

"I cannot see him to-night. Ask his business. I know no one of that name," returned Constance Dyton, keeping her countenance in shadow that its altered appearance might not be remarked.

"Yes, ma'am," replied the man, withdrawing.

A few moments only elapsed when he again entered.

"If you please, ma'am, the person I mentioned is waiting. He says he has explained his business in this note."

"Stay a moment, then," said Miss Dyton, hastily opening the envelope, which she supposed contained a request for the settlement of some account, the money for which might be urgently needed.

But the very first words she read almost

forced from her an exclamation of distress, and when she could speak, she said, faintly, "The person can come and speak to me, Hicks."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the servant.

As he closed the door, Constance wildly read again the note just placed in her hands, and she had barely done so when Hicks returned, ushering in a small, fair-haired, middle-aged man.

Was he mechanic, workman, or gentleman? Such a question was difficult to answer at once. He bowed with ease as the tortured lady motioned him to be seated. Then Hicks, withdrew, leaving her alone with the stranger.

"Madam," he began, addressing her before she could find courage to say a word, "as my communication will have informed you, it has come to my knowledge that you have lost an important letter, the contents of which, if known, would make your friends aware that you had ventured to offer your hand in marriage to a gentleman. However, no one need be made acquainted with this little episode if you are willing to accept my terms for keeping silence. I shall not ask of you houses, or lands, or even gold."

"Where is my letter?" asked Constance, now first breaking the silence.

"That is not the immediate question, madam," returned he. "You have to determine whether you will pay the terms I impose for guarding silence concerning your secret. These terms are not exorbitant."

"Mr. Case—for that, I believe, is your name—you have no right to detain a private communication addressed to another person," cried Constance, with indignation.

"Of course I have not the right. Of course I could be prosecuted. In avowing my theft I am aware that I subject myself to legal proceedings; but do you not perceive that should you pursue such a course, it would lay bare a secret which your best friends would counsel you not to disclose? Therefore, madam, I have ventured to speak of terms."

He was as calm, as respectful in demeanor as if he had come there at her request to discuss ordinary business or receive her instructions.

"What are your terms?" asked Constance, in agonized tones.

"I will state them very shortly, madam. My silence can be assured by giving me some information which is as of much importance to me as your secret is to you. You are a resident in this neighborhood, a person of position and wealth, and must know the other residents in the place—among others, the family of Sir Everard Culhampton?"

"Yes; I visit them!" faltered Constance Dyton.

"It is concerning them that I want particulars, and perhaps a little more—a little aid," said the unwelcome visitor.

"What information can I give you?" returned Miss Dyton. "Sir Everard is a wealthy man—cold, proud, silent, not very popular; but he is respected; he holds his due position; is a just landlord, and not disliked."

"Hum! ha!" rejoined the personage who called himself Edgar Case. "So far, so good! But I want full particulars as to his habits of life. In plain words, at what hour does he rise in the morning?—how is he accustomed to pass his time?—when does he usually retire for the night?—how does he occupy himself generally?—does he sit in his study most of his hours, or does he pass them with the ladies of his family?—what is his dinner-hour? When you have answered all these questions to my satisfaction, madam, I shall trouble you on another point."

It would be impossible to describe the trouble into which Miss Dyton was thrown by this address.

For aught she knew, her questioner might be a rogue in league with others to rob Sir Everard's country house. It looked very like it.

In her distress, she could only stammer out



that she believed the Baronet's dinner-hour was eight o'clock; that she really did not know his habits of every day.

"Acquaint yourself with them, then, madam, as soon as possible—that is my advice. And, at the same time, take an opportunity of observing the furniture in the library of the house; count the drawers in the writing-table on the left side of the fire-place, and invent some device for being left alone in the room for a moment. You can then ascertain if this key"—he drew one from his pocket—"opens the small uppermost drawer on the right hand side of the table. In fact, unlock that drawer, and leave it open. That is all I require. It will hurt no one. I will now leave you to act on the instructions I have had the pleasure of detailing. Shall we name this day week for our next meeting, or would you prefer an earlier time?"

"Sir," replied Miss Dyton, "you must understand that there are some things harder to bear than exposure to ridicule. I cannot commit an underhand action—no, not even to preserve the cruel secret of which you have dishonestly possessed yourself!"

"I will leave you to think it over, madam. Of course, it is for you to decide," replied the stranger, rising. "If the simple action of trying a key is too hard a price to pay for my silence regarding an *extremely* delicate matter, I will say no more. Good-evening! I shall have the honor of calling on you again on a future occasion!"

And he bowed himself out, but took care to place the key on the table in a conspicuous spot.

Goaded to desperation, Constance Dyton started up, murmuring to herself, "Since he forces me to it, I will turn the tables on him! I will tell him any thing! I will say that I have unlocked the drawer! Indeed, I will give a hint to Sir Everard to remove any valuable from that place, and to have his house watched!"

She took a hurried walk up and down the room, still musing aloud.

"Yes, yes; I will put Sir Everard on his guard, without, of course, letting him know of the letter! I will drive over very early to-morrow. I wish that I could go to-night. It will be easy to say that I have been so minutely questioned by a stranger about things at Culhampton that I fear a design exists to rob the house, especially the library!"

Then she rung the bell hurriedly, and, when Hicks answered it, desired that Hinton would come and speak to her.

"Mr. Hinton is out, ma'am. He told me he should not be in till late—that I must attend to every thing."

"Oh, very well," answered she. "I wish for tea to be taken to the library, as I shall not dine to-night. I am indisposed."

"Very well, madam," replied Hicks, withdrawing.

The night came down. All was peaceful in the large and handsomely-furnished dwelling of the mistress of Dyton Lodge, save her own inquiet heart. In what had occurred since last night she foresaw the break-up of her much-loved home and all her surroundings, for when it once transpired that she had proposed to Seymour Cranleigh, she knew she could not face her friends in the county.

No; she must exile herself, and yet the story might follow her, as such stories always did. And somehow, now that that her letter had miscarried, she seemed to know by intuition or some subtle enlightenment, that had it reached its destination, her offer would have been rejected.

"How could I have ventured on so wild—so unrecognized an action? But I am bitterly punished already!" moaned she.

The leaden hours of that dreadful evening appeared interminable. The unhappy lady saw herself caught in a trap, from which there was no escape. With difficulty she compelled herself to descend to the library, that she might keep up appearances with the servants.

Once there, she sunk in an easy-chair by the fireside, giving herself up to the most gloomy reflections. In that hour her thoughts went back to an old love of hers, from whom her own petulance and exacting vanity had parted her. Ah! if she had married him, and settled down as a happy matron, this dreadful thing which had fallen upon her could never have occurred. Sheltered in Lancelot Lythwaite's affection she would have been above and beyond the blight which had smitten her. He had wedded some one else now, and was abroad, where he had long since forgotten her, his once idolized Constance, as was meet since he had wedded another.

But yet Miss Dyton sighed wearily as she thus reflected, longing unspeakably that she had accepted the happy lot offered her, and become the cherished wife of Lancelot. But it was due to her own pride and folly that they had been separated! Very grievous then was the sigh which had escaped the lips of the prosperous woman.

All of a sudden the stillness of the house was broken, footsteps hastily approached the door of the library, which was thrown open as some one entered as hastily, and, looking up, she perceived her servant, Hinton, his face flushed, and he himself in some disarray.

"We've caught the rogue, and searched him, ma'am!" cried he. "As I suspected, he came again, sure enough, to the empty house! He had nothing about him but *this*, that I and my brother made sure of before we let him go, and here is the only letter he had with him. It must be yours, ma'am, for the seal isn't broken, and it is addressed to Mr. Seymour Cranleigh."

"Oh, it must be my letter!" she gasped, tremblingly, and, seizing it, tore off the covering. It should never be sent now. She was saved—double saved by this recovery.

But that moment of joyful hope was followed by as deep a spasm of despair. The letter she had so hastily torn from its envelope was not the one she had written to Seymour, and she held in her hand some lines never intended for her perusal.

#### CHAPTER V. TENDER MOMENTS.

THE letter fluttered to the ground as Miss Dyton sunk back on a sofa near. She did not faint, nor was she unconscious, save through the sharp pain she experienced, and for a few moments she bowed her face on her hands, incapable of speech or connected thought. The revulsion of feeling from hope to despair had overwhelmed her.

It was during these few moments that Hinton picked up the paper, and read:

"MR. SEYMOUR CRANLEIGH,—

"The writer of these lines has become acquainted with certain mysteries connected with your family, which have been studiously concealed from you. The time is come when you should know them, and act for yourself. I risk something by this communication, being unaware of the sort of person I have to deal with in you, whether prudent or reckless, of good faith, or the reverse.

"If you would know more, you will find me an hour before noon to-morrow, by the Twisted Tree, at the entrance to the grounds at Riversmead. If you do not appear, I shall take it as an intimation that you are content with things as they are—so I will only add that my secret information might give you an inheritance.

Yours,

"EDGAR CASE."

"Oh, oh!" said Hinton to himself; "a question of money, is it? But I mistrust that party. I mistrust him if it's he that took mistress's letter."

At this moment, Constance started up, crying, "Hinton, that letter! We have no right to it! It must go to its address!"

"La! yes, ma'am; and so it shall, all right. I've just run my eye through it. It's signed by a party named Case—Edgar Case."

Case! Too well poor Constance remembered the name!

"A man of that name came here this afternoon," said she, faintly.

"Indeed, ma'am? Well, it seems he knows something to Mr. Cranleigh's advantage, so I'll

let the young gentleman have his letter at once; only he sha'n't know how I came by it."

Miss Dyton, more dead than alive, her brain a painful whirl, was unable to question Hinton just then, and allowed him to leave her, that he might carry to its address the letter which had so unexpectedly fallen into her possession, and which, with trembling hands, she resealed.

"It must be taken to Mr. Cranleigh at once, Hinton," she faltered.

"Certainly, ma'am; he shall have it before another hour has gone over," replied Hinton; and went away, not to be questioned more.

Now it chanced that that very evening Seymour had been detained to dine at Riversmead; for Wilfred Seale, finding him there after his kindness in escorting Angelica home, would insist on his remaining.

A message had been, therefore, dispatched to the Parsonage to say that Mr. Cranleigh would not return till about eleven o'clock, as he was dining at Riversmead.

It was during this evening, before the gentlemen left the dining-room, that a servant called Mr. Cranleigh out of the apartment. Somebody (a stranger), he was told, begged to speak to him on urgent business.

In the hall Seymour found a rough-looking man, who thrust a letter into his hand, and immediately departed.

This supposed stranger was Hinton in disguise; for he did not wish to say how he had obtained the letter.

With immense surprise, Cranleigh read the mysterious communication—reaching him, too, so mysteriously; but he at once resolved to keep the appointment. Why should he not? At noon, close to the large grounds of a place full of inmates, there could be no room for a trap of any kind. Nor was Seymour the sort of man to fear a trap.

The young man's heart beat faster as he re-entered Miss Seale's drawing-room a moment afterward. Was he to-morrow to hear something which would give him the right to avow his devotion for Angelica? His looks sought her girlish, elegant figure; and she just then chanced to meet his gaze fixed on her with a new meaning in it. Hope mingling with his worship, her own glance fell before his; while she became suffused with blushes. Fortunately Laura was occupied in opening a parcel of new books, or she must have been enlightened as to the unspoken affection subsisting in her sister's heart for Seymour, and his adoration for Angelica.

"Oh, Mr. Cranleigh," exclaimed she, suddenly leaving her books, "I want to show you some new photographs which I brought from Rome last year. You will appreciate them; so I will get them directly."

"Thank you very much!" said Seymour.

As he spoke, Miss Seale left the apartment; and, as Wilfred had not come in from the dining-room, and his brother was from home, the undeclared lovers were for the time alone.

A brief time, indeed; but long enough for Seymour to approach Angelica, and to say, in an impassioned voice, "Can you forgive me all that I said, and left unsaid, this afternoon? Oh, Angelica, I said either too little or a thousand times too much!"

She gave no reply to his entreaty; but stood there visibly agitated, with downcast lashes; while on her beautiful face a joy she could not conceal was painted.

"Can you—will you forgive me?" he repeated, advancing close to her side.

"Yes," she breathed, softly.

And then he did a thing far more unpardonable than that for which he was asking her forgiveness. He caught her in his arms, and kissed her cheek.

"Read this, dearest," faltered he, releasing her. "Oh, if it means any thing, I may then dare to ask your love, for I shall not be penniless!"

Unconsciously the young girl's fingers closed over the paper he placed within them, while at the same time she murmured, "Whether pen-



niless or not, makes no difference to me. None, none!"

A tide of rapture swept through his heart. He knew his love accepted—joyfully accepted, poor though he was.

But even in that rapture he told himself that he could not demand her as his bride, portionless as he was.

"Angelica, I am too happy! What have I done to be so blest?"

And again he caught her to his heart.

But now Laura's step was heard returning. Wilfred's voice sounded the other side of the door, and Angelica fled into the small drawing-room adjoining; for her confusion and agitation were so great, that she could not immediately face her brother and sister.

She could hear, as she sunk on a couch in the inner apartment, Wilfred, commenting on the beauty of the photographs, and Laura chiming in.

Then she heard, too, the door of the large room open and shut hastily, and exclamations of sudden haste and trouble.

"We'll send you down to the station. Don't lose time in returning to the Parsonage," said Wilfred. "I am almost certain a train is due soon."

"I'll look in a 'Bradshaw,'" said Laura.

"And I'll see that a carriage comes round at once," added Wilfred.

Something disastrous had happened, then, to Seymour. She was sure of it.

In a moment Angelica appeared from the inner room, pale now, and with questioning eyes.

Seymour was as pale as herself. He stood motionless, as if overwhelmed.

Wilfred had left the room. Laura at a distant table, was poring over a "Bradshaw."

Seymour came forward to meet Angelica.

"Go for me to the Twisted Tree to-morrow. Explain why I could not be there myself," said he, in a low voice, hurriedly. "My only sister has met with an accident. I have been telegraphed for."

"Be sure that I will go," returned Angelica, in a tone as low as his own.

"Yes, Mr. Cranleigh," cried Laura advancing. "There is a train in twenty minutes. You will be in time, I hope—I trust."

"Ten thousand thanks for so much kindness! You will send and tell my uncle, I know."

"At once!" cried Laura.

Then Wilfred hurried in.

"The dog-cart will be round directly. I'm so sorry for you, Cranleigh! I'll go down, and break the sad news myself at the Parsonage."

The young men shook hands together without another word. In silence, too, Seymour took his leave of the sisters, one of whom was so inexpressibly dear to him—one of whom had just, so charmingly, owned her affection for him.

With rapture and pain throbbing in his young heart, the thought of the mystery, breaking through at times, adding wonder to his commingling emotions, Seymour drove away from Riversmead, and was whirled far from his beloved one.

## CHAPTER VI.

BY THE TWISTED TREE.

THE morrow had dawned.

Laura and her sister were at breakfast. Their brother had not yet joined them—a circumstance so unusual, that Miss Seale was surprised and uneasy.

"He cannot be well," she exclaimed, for the third time, when the door opened, and Wilfred entered.

"Good-morning, girls! How are you?" said he. "How late it is! No wonder; for I have been trying to batter something like sense into the head of an obstinate woman."

"And have you succeeded?" asked Laura.

"Not I! But I have tried to stop an absurd story from getting into circulation. In vain. Only imagine! Mrs. Roberts, our gardener's

wife, has started the idea of a ghost. It seems she was passing the empty house the night before last, after dark, and saw a light there; that she listened, and hearing noises, ran for her life from the place. The odd thing is that, as I walked down to the Parsonage last night to break the bad news poor Cranleigh had received to his uncle, I myself was startled by catching the sound of some noise, as if some one were inside that house. As I returned, I stood listening for full five minutes, and, unmistakably, some one was there; but when I advanced, and called out, the noise ceased. Some roguery is at work, I suppose."

"Why could you not let Mrs. Roberts enjoy her ghost in peace?" cried Laura, laughing. "The rustics so seldom get hold of a real bit of excitement. Angelica, shouldn't you like our neighborhood to possess a ghost?"

"A ghost! What would be the use of a ghost?" said Angelica, dreamily; for she was absorbed in the new and heavenly joy of assurance in Seymour's affection.

On awaking that morning, this blissful knowledge had bathed her in the light of a new life.

"The use of a ghost! It would be delightful!" replied Laura. "Riversmead will never rank as an old place, with the charm of antiquity about it, till it has its own ghost; so I feel very much obliged to Mrs. Roberts for setting the story afloat. I shall give her a little encouragement, and take a peep myself, by daylight, at the empty house."

"I might have spared myself any arguments with Mrs. Roberts, then, if you mean to interest yourself with her fancies," remarked Wilfred; "but I, too, mean to take a peep, by dusk, at the empty house. Evidently some one was there, you know."

"Don't get robbed, Wilfred," replied Laura.

Here Palmer, the butler, appeared with the morning papers and letters, and Angelica rose and left the room.

It was half-past nine o'clock. In another hour she would start to keep Seymour's rendezvous at the Twisted Tree; for though it took scarcely twenty minutes to reach the spot, Angelica determined to go early, as she feared her sister might ask her to walk or drive with her, and that she should have to make excuses which would create surprise.

An hour soon slips away, even when we are impatient for it to pass. Half-past ten struck at length, and then Angelica sped with soft footfall across the hall, gained the gardens, crossed a plantation, and as she still stood within her brother's gates, she saw the Twisted Tree before her.

Bare, tortuous branches tossing a little in the wind; cold sunlight falling athwart the greensward round the old tree; a silent, solitary spot, shut in by a belt of smaller trees, now leafless and bare also—such was the scene that met Angelica's eyes as she looked toward the old oak.

She took out her watch, and finding it still wanted a quarter of an hour to the time appointed, paced slowly backward and forward, pondering.

Meantime, some one else, all unknown to her, cautiously approached the tree, which was hollow and of huge size. This personage, creeping under the slight railing which had been put up to protect the aged oak, quietly ensconced himself within the cavity of the trunk, and was lost to view.

It was Hinton, who, unable to resist the temptation of learning the mystery, and persuading himself that he was acting in order to protect his mistress's secret, had determined to hide himself within hearing. No doubt this was blamable enough; but this was what Hinton did.

He had, of course, been profoundly silent to his mistress as to his intentions, inventing some excuse to absent himself from his duties that morning.

Angelica, still pacing up and down within her brother's grounds, had no idea of the

servant's presence, though he noted her approach, and wondered what would happen should the stranger arrive and find her there just as Mr. Cranleigh came up, for, as yet, Hinton was ignorant of Seymour's absence.

And now another person approached the Twisted Tree, who also was wholly unconscious of the little scene to be enacted under its bare branches. A gentleman of middle age, sad-visaged, yet of manly bearing. He did not catch sight of Angelica, for by this time she had come to the foot of the tree, and was waiting on one side of its ample trunk as he walked upon the other side. Then leaning against the railing which encircled the tree, the stranger gave way to musing.

"Am I a fool for my pains? Is she likely to be more changed than this place, this tree, where, fifteen years ago, she practically confessed that she loved me? Pshaw! loved! and yet let me go, and go in pain! It could not be that she loved me! Again I ask myself if I am a fool for my pains? Is it reasonable that, if she sent me away then, she would accept me now?"

Thus ran his thoughts, as he folded his arms, and looked sadly up at the branches overhead.

"Here we stood, Constance and I, that day so long ago when I believed her mine! What words shall I use to open my suit? Has she any feeling, or none? Well, that I shall soon discover; but nothing shall prevent me now from taking this last chance!"

The looks of the new-comer had been gloomily fixed on the turf at his feet as he continued his reflections; thus he did not perceive the figure of a man, small and light-haired, who neared the old tree on the side where Angelica waited. But he started on hearing a musical, girlish voice break the stillness.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Edgar Case?" it said.

The noble-looking stranger on the other side of the tree caught these words, but not attaching any importance to them, and absorbed in his own thoughts, remained leaning against the trunk of the oak.

"Yes; I am named Case, young lady," replied the small, light-complexioned man. "But pardon me for asking how you became aware of it? I expected to meet a gentleman here—Mr. Seymour Cranleigh. That is, I came on the chance of meeting him, for by misadventure a letter I had written to him was taken from me, and another I sent him may have been delayed."

"Mr. Cranleigh did receive a letter from you, and he has deputed me to explain that he has been summoned away by telegram, his only sister having met with an accident. Otherwise, he was most anxious to keep this appointment," answered Angelica.

"Oh, indeed! That alters matters!" exclaimed Mr. Case. "And so Mr. Cranleigh wished you to replace him at this interview? That argues that he would have no secrets unshared by you. Permit me, then, to ask your name?"

At the word "secrets," the unseen gentleman on the opposite side of the tree-trunk started from his reflections, and was about to reveal his presence, in order to prevent the possibility of hearing any thing not intended for his ears, when the reply, "Angelica Seale," made him pause. He would keep his position if no secret was revealed, for another duty was now forced upon him, that of protecting from imprudence a young and lovely girl, whose family had once been well known to him.

"May I beg you to tell me where Mr. Cranleigh may communicate with you, Mr. Case, as he is naturally anxious to hear more?" continued Angelica.

"Are you yourself ready to listen, in Mr. Cranleigh's interests, to this mystery? Tell me that much, young lady, and I shall know how to act."

"Is there not time that I should first ask his permission to hear this secret?" replied she.



"I could write to-night, and receive a reply after to-morrow."

"Who says that women cannot restrain their curiosity?" laughed Mr. Case. "But love can do all things—I beg your pardon, I meant friendship! Well, young lady, I agree to defer my communication, according to your wish; but urge your friend, Mr. Cranleigh, to trust entirely to your discretion. You have proved to me that you can keep a secret, by your caution in consenting to hear one. On the third day from this, meet me here again; or, better still, behind the empty house on the road to the Parsonage."

Angelica repressed a start. All that her brother Wilfred had been saying concerning the ghost, the noise and the light connected with this disused house, rushed to her mind.

"If it is necessary, I will go there," she faltered. "But when? And could not I meet you here?"

"Here? Yes, if you will have it so," replied he. "It had better be at dusk."

"Why not at the same hour as this?" asked Angelica, who had begun to feel some distrust of this person, and who experienced a sort of repulsion for him. But her devotion for Seymour made her conceal it.

"I cannot be here till late in the afternoon. But you will be at the entrance of your brother's grounds, and I would be the first to protect you, should protection be found necessary," replied Mr. Case.

"I will be here at five o'clock," answered Angelica.

"No—at six!" said he, quickly.

"At six, then, I will here," she rejoined. "And if there is nothing further you wish to acquaint me with, I will now return home," added she.

"I need not detain you," he answered. "Mr. Cranleigh is highly favored indeed to possess such a friend."

"Mr. Cranleigh is well known to my family. Good-morning, Mr. Case!" said the young lady, moving away.

The small, fair-haired man, who called himself Case, remained stationary, watching her out of sight. When she had withdrawn a short distance he rubbed his hands, grinning. When she had vanished through the gate, he laughed aloud.

"I am in luck, truly, to have to deal with a girl who is over head and ears in love with the young gentleman. Ha, ha! it will be a comparatively easy task to deceive the young lady!"

As he stood there, chuckling to himself, the sad, noble-visaged stranger slid forward, peering cautiously an inch or two round the tree-trunk. There he crushed himself against the stem, apparently awaiting the departure of Mr. Case.

The latter, after rubbing his hands a little longer, and muttering detached exclamations of satisfaction, walked rapidly away, without going round to the other side of the tree. The sad-looking, gentlemanly individual was thus, as he supposed, left alone.

Sighing, he walked round the tree, his noble features assuming a graver expression.

"However my own affairs go, it may be well I came here," escaped his lips. "I would—nay, must have revealed my presence had there been more said."

Then he, too, passed under the slight rail surrounding the tree, and looked into the cavity, coming face to face as he did so with the scared countenance of Miss Dyton's factotum, Hinton.

Which was the most amazed? It would be hard to tell.

"What are you doing here, hiding in the tree? Are you in league with that rogue who has just got out of sight?" cried the stranger; "for his own words made it evident that he has some plot to deceive the young lady."

"I, sir?—I in league with a rogue?" cried Hinton. "Oh, sir! I'm a most respectable man! I've lived with Miss Dyton, of Dyton Lodge, for fifteen years, and with her father,

General Dyton, for as many more. I've nothing to do with rogues."

"Then why are you hiding here?" cried the gentleman, across whose sunburnt visage a hot flush passed as Miss Dyton's name was mentioned.

"I—I had business, sir," stammered Hinton.

"I don't understand what business could bring you to hide in a tree to listen, unless it was a very underhand business!" rejoined Hinton's questioner. "Do you know that man who was speaking to the young lady?"

"He stole a letter of my mistress's. I wanted to be down on him, sir," replied Hinton; "that's all I can tell you concerning him."

"Stole a letter?" exclaimed the gentleman. Then he added, "Is Miss Dyton at home?"

"Yes, sir; but I believe she is indisposed. She did not breakfast down-stairs this morning."

Another flush across the stranger's brow.

"I think your name is Hinton?" remarked he.

Hinton, surprised, answered, "Yes, sir;" and stood gaping after the gentleman as the latter walked hastily away.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AN OLD LOVE.

CONSTANCE DYTON, thoroughly miserable on account of the lost letter, and seriously alarmed at the visit she had received from the mysterious stranger, was indeed unfit to-day to take her part in the ordinary affairs of life, and remained in her own room till a late hour in the afternoon. But as dusk crept down over the world without, and the hour for expecting any visitors was past, she ventured to descend into her beautiful library.

It was so lonely up-stairs, with her own sad thoughts. Besides, she must write a few cautious lines to warn Sir Everard Culhampton. That was a duty, since she had not carried out her intention of calling at his house for that purpose.

It was strange how far into the background had receded her fancy for Seymour. A day or two since she had persuaded herself that it would be for her own happiness and for his that they should form a partnership for life. Now her sole anxiety was that she might reclaim that offer.

The disparity in their age, the likelihood that he might love some girl almost young enough to be her daughter, the dreadful pain she would feel at the rejection of her offer (even though she now believed it unwise), all stood out in their true proportions to her mental gaze.

And, as she confessed to herself that she had done very foolishly, her thoughts swept back, as they had done but yesterday, to a true love which she had rejected as foolishly.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of Hinton.

"Mr. Case has called, ma'am," said he.

"Who? Oh, I cannot see him! He said he should not be here for a week!" cried Constance, sorely troubled.

"Very well, ma'am," replied the servant, respectfully.

But Hinton was, as may be supposed, extremely curious to find out this man's business with his mistress since he had witnessed his meeting with Angelica that morning at the Twisted Tree.

"Stay! I think it will be better that I should see him; then I can dismiss him finally. Send him here, Hinton," said the unhappy Constance.

If she must bear exposure, better fly at once from the ridicule of the neighborhood; but she would not connive at a base action.

How bitter was the moment or two in which she waited for the entrance of the man Case!

He came in bowing, and when Hinton had closed the door, began, in smooth tones, "Circumstances prevent me delaying a week, mad-

am, as I wished to do, in order to give you more time for consideration. But much time is not needed to decide so simple a matter. Are you now prepared to find some pretext for calling at Sir Everard's—how easy to call on a day when you know the family is out!—and, by asking to rest a short time in the library, to open the drawer I have indicated. Will you engage to do so?"

"Never!" cried Constance, with indignation. "What! Enter a friend's house, and treacherously lay a trap for him? Never!"

Mr. Case remained quite unmoved.

"Well, madam, I feared you would still be blind to your own interests, and as I feel for you, I will forbear to ask so hard a thing! I will engage to keep silence concerning the letter we both know of if you will consent to do something much simpler. Invite Sir Everard and Lady Culhampton to pass the day here; I will demand nothing further! But," continued he, a cold, hard, impenetrable expression coming over his features—"but if you do not consent to do as much as that, now, while I am in the room, allowing me to carry away your letter of invitation, I will tell the tale of the missive you sent a day or two since, containing an offer of marriage to a gentleman! Your own servants shall hear of it in detail before I quit your roof, and I will engage that the story is all over the county by to-morrow about this time!"

Constance was profoundly silent. She was as fixed as ever in her determination to do right, but thus driven to bay, she reflected on the best way to save herself from that which might still be spared her. It would be like facing death to face Hinton and the men-servants, her own maid and those of her household, when they should know the secret of that fatal letter.

"I will write the invitation, and allow you to carry it to the post," said she, after a lapse of two or three minutes.

"Ah, that is right. After all, it is but a small thing to invite a friend to one's house! I must read the invitation, of course, to see that it is a *bona fide* one."

"You shall do so," replied Constance, coldly.

She wished only to gain a few hours of time in which to leave Dyton Lodge; the pain of exposure after her departure she knew she must bear, for it was her intention to put Sir Everard and his wife on their guard by the very same post which bore her enforced invitation to them.

"There, sir!" he said, when she had written a few lines to Lady Culhampton, expressing a hope that her ladyship and Sir Everard would be able to name the day after to-morrow to lunch and spend the afternoon at Dyton Lodge.

"Charming!" said Mr. Case. "Now, madam, you may feel profoundly at ease!"

"And my letter? That must be returned to me!" said Constance.

"On the evening of the day Sir Everard and Lady Culhampton pay their visit to you, you will receive it, madam—after their departure! You may rely on my word for that. I now have the honor to wish you good-night!"

Miss Dyton made no reply. By the evening of the day named she knew she would be far away. If Mr. Case restored her letter, it would be too late—or, rather, it would never be restored, as before then she would have warned Sir Everard.

For the first few moments after Case's departure she felt paralyzed, but soon started up, for she had much to do—very much! To-night was the only time she would have for arranging what she would lock up at the Lodge; what few precious things should be sent after her to the strange place abroad in which she meant to bury herself from ridicule.

The Lodge must be sold; the furniture, her horses, her carriages; the old place must pass to strangers.

With a throbbing brain she rung the bell.

"Hinton," said she, "tell my maid to pack up all that is necessary for a journey to Lon-



don. I find business will take me there to-morrow morning. I need not go by the first train, but by the one which leaves at noon."

"Yes, ma'am," said the man, surprised, and also divining that his mistress was in trouble.

Hardly had the old servant closed the door on retiring, when he returned, bearing a card on a tray.

"Colonel Lythwaite has called, and begs to see you, ma'am," said he.

"Who?" said Miss Dyton, faintly, and then sunk upon a couch.

"Colonel Lythwaite, ma'am."

"I—I am sorry, but I am too much—indisposed to see any one else, Hinton," faltered she.

"Yes, ma'am."

Then the door closed again, and Constance covered her pale face with her hands, shivering. For what a tragedy had Hinton's simple announcement recalled to her! She saw before her a tall, noble man, young then, a man who worshiped her, a man who had prayed her many times to accept his love, which then she made light of; or rather, she had trifled with it so cruelly—made so sure of its endurance—that she valued it lightly, counting that it could be hers at the slightest word.

And so she had let Lancelot Lythwaite hope one day, driving him to despair the next.

She, young, beautiful, flattered, with the world at her feet, had no idea of settling down as a poor officer's wife. Let him wait a few years.

Then came a day (when she had been flirting so carelessly with a certain Lord Damer that all the world believed she would accept him) when Colonel (then Lieutenant) Lythwaite came for the last time to pour his love at her feet.

"I come—but how hopelessly!" said he, with deep emotion. "Constance, can you love me a little in return for my entire devotion?"

"Mr. Lythwaite," cried she, carelessly, "why don't you say something new to me? You have said the same thing dozens of times before! You really ought to know by this time that variety is very pleasing!"

Stung to the quick, he called out, "I am answered! I offered you a life's worship, and you have rejected it with light words; but that I could forgive, had you not tortured me by drawing me on to hope one day, and crushing me the next. Adieu, Constance! May you find another love as true as mine; but never again—no, not if the impossible could be, and you should give me something of the love I bear you—never again will I ask you to be my wife! I swear it solemnly!"

So he left her; and then she found out that life without him was desolate.

But how to recall him? Had he not sworn that never again would he ask her to be his wife? The next thing she heard of her rejected lover was that his regiment was ordered for service in India, and the next, (it followed very soon on the previous tidings) was that Lieutenant Lythwaite was married, and that he and his young wife had sailed for a distant land.

From time to time rumors reached her through mutual friends. It was said that the young lady he had married had been long secretly attached to him, and that at last he had found out her worth—that he was now as devoted to her as she could wish. Then, long after, she read in the newspapers of the birth of their son, and also of Lieutenant Lythwaite's promotion.

Constance tried hard to forget, and, after so many years, believed she had forgotten; but to-night, in her sorrow—to-night, when her old love came to her door—she knew she had never ceased to remember. If she had offered her hand to another man, it was because she had told herself that the past could never be undone—that she should see Lancelot no more—that Seymour Cranleigh loved her—that she was very lonely.

But *why* was Lancelot there, demanding to see her? Did he come in scorn? Surely, yes!

And she, overwhelmed as she was by another trouble, had cried out that she could not see him. But her heart rose up clamoring for one sight of him after all these years, as the door closed on Hinton. Oh, why had she been so hasty?

"If you please, ma'am," said the old servant, re-entering, "Colonel Lythwaite hopes you will kindly make the effort to grant him a few moments' interview, as he has traveled a long way to see you."

"Wait a moment, Hinton. Is there any mistake? What is this gentleman like? Is he tall?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am; tall, dark, and very noble-looking, but seems as if he'd known trouble, ma'am. And quite the gentleman!"

Hinton did not add that he had had a previous encounter with the gentleman that morning at the Twisted Tree; nor, did he speak of the sovereign slipped by the stranger into his hand just now, as he had said, "Manage that I may see your mistress!"

Constance no longer doubted that she was about to behold her old love.

After a supreme moment of suspense, agony, rapture, and fear, Colonel Lythwaite himself stood before her.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MISS DYTON IS TEMPTED ANEW.

SHE was speechless as he hurried to her side, extending his hand. A brave effort on her part followed; an effort to greet him unmovedly after all these years—he the husband of another!

"This is an unlooked-for pleasure, Colonel Lythwaite!" she began. And then she motioned him to a seat, for she could not articulate another word.

"You must not dash that pleasure for me, Constance—let me call you so again!—by addressing me in that formal manner. Fifteen years is long enough, surely, in which to forget animosity!"

"There is nothing of that on my side," she murmured, her handsome features moved by strong and repressed emotion.

Colonel Lythwaite rose from the seat he was occupying, and took one by the side of Miss Dyton.

"You have heard of my loss, of course?" he said, sadly.

"No; I have heard nothing. I am very sorry if you have had losses," replied Constance.

"I felt sorrow—grievous sorrow, believing life would be henceforth still darker for me," he continued; "but since that time, a year and a half ago, I have recognized some sad truths. Constance, I have lost both my wife and child; they died in India. And, as I have told you, their loss was very bitter to me. But my boy was a cripple, and his mother mourned his death so grievously that she desired to die. Nor could all my efforts to make her happy ever prove quite successful. She ever remembered that my deepest affection had been given—to *you*!"

"He remembers me still!" shot like a thrill of rapture through the heart of Constance. But this swift delight speedily died away. Who was she to rejoice at anything now—she who had proposed to another—she who was about to have her secret exposed, and even to-night had to make preparations for flight from that exposure?

"And thus—after the first few months—I told myself that they, the mother and our son, were happier than I could make them," continued Colonel Lythwaite. "It was then that, despite myself, my heart turned backward. Since that day when you sent me away from you, Constance, I have become rich—as rich almost as yourself. My uncle George left me all he had. Thus I am not now on such an unequal level as I stood on that ever-remembered day when I swore, so madly—Constance" (he had taken her hand in his), "do you remember what I swore?"

She could not answer him; but that her

heart was full of the scene he alluded to, her altered face, her gathering tears, the trouble in her air, assured him, without need of words.

"Do you remember?" he whispered, clasping her hand more warmly in his own.

"Yes, yes!" she replied, in a very low tone, seeking now to withdraw her hand from his clasp. Oh, that he had come to her with these words but a few days since! She need not have listened then as she had listened at this moment!

"If you have kept my oath in remembrance," he went on, "you will remember its cause also—my mad worship of you! Constance, that love of mine has never been crushed out, never can be; and it has been growing warmer all these past weeks, since I decided to come and see you again. And now that I do see you, here, close to me, oh, Constance! how shall we manage about that oath I swore? It was so deep I dare not forswear myself. But I may tell you how much I love you now; how well I will love you for the future! And I may ask you if you cannot—now—return my deep affection?"

He marveled to perceive that the swift joy she could not entirely conceal at his words was succeeded by an expression of hopelessness.

"Lancelot," she faltered, vainly trying to check two tears which fell over her cheeks, "I was unworthy of your love long ago, because I esteemed it lightly; and now, when I do not esteem it of small account—now, when it would be my glory, my joy—I am still more unworthy of it."

"Never will I believe that!" cried the delighted soldier, catching her in his arms and imprinting a fervent kiss on her beautiful cheek, still stained with the tear which had just fallen over it.

"But it is true," said she, making a vain effort to release herself from his embrace.

"Again I refuse to believe it!" he cried, rapturously. "Oh, Constance, shall we indeed be happy at last despite your coldness, despite my oath, despite all?"

"I have not deserved to be happy," she rejoined, faintly.

"And would it make your happiness, dearest, if you married me? Mind, I dare not ask you, because of my oath; but perhaps we can manage to settle it between us, for Constance, it is Leap Year!"

And he spoke with all a lover's fondness in his tone, gazed with all a lover's fondness at her so long divided from him hopelessly.

A sharp uneasiness smote him to see her shrink from him as if in pain. Leap Year! why that was the cause of all her woe! But for that fact she would hardly have had courage to ask Seymour Cranleigh the question she had done; but for that fact she could now joyfully respond to Lancelot's love.

"You will not let my wretched oath divide us, Constance?" he cried.

"No, no, Lancelot! But something else will—something of my own doing. You would despise me if you understood it. So take this consolation away with you, that if you knew my secret you would no longer wish for our marriage."

"Tell me what is this thing which is to divide us? Why, Constance, my own love, you speak as if you had committed all the crimes in the calendar."

"It is not a crime," she murmured; "but it is something so foolish, so unconsidered, so wrong, that you would despise me for it as much as I despise myself. I have exposed myself to ridicule; by to-morrow, about this time, all the neighborhood will hear what I have done, and to-night, while there is still time, I am making a few hurried preparations for flight, for I dare not face the laughter of my own servants, of my friends and acquaintances. Oh, you will hear quite soon enough what it is!"

"Constance, you amaze me!" said the Colonel. "Let a devoted friend and lover advise you. Confide in me!"



"No, no! It would kill me to tell you the truth," she replied, hiding her face from his gaze on the arm of the couch on which she was seated; "and I can foresee what your judgment would and must be. I will write to you when I am on foreign soil, but we shall part now, to-night, in a few short moments."

"We shall do no such thing!" exclaimed Colonel Lythwaite. "Of course you may send me from you; I cannot prevent that. But to-night you have made me believe that you could love me, and it will take a good deal more than this to send me away altogether."

"I will write," again murmured she, in cruel agitation.

"Write! Yes, by all means! Every word of yours will be dear to me. But I must know what this terrible secret is. Then I can do something to aid you. Don't keep me in the dark, I implore you!"

But she was deaf to his prayers; and at length, seeing that she was exhausted with grief and emotion, he left her for that evening, declaring that nothing should prevent him following her whithersoever she went.

"Hinton," said he to that respectable servant, as he passed out, "is your mistress ill? She seems troubled about something."

"It's trouble that makes her ill, to my thinking, sir," replied Hinton; "and yet it doesn't seem as if a lady like Miss Dyton ought to have any trouble."

"Has she appeared thus depressed for long?"

"Dear me, no, sir! A week since, all was well. But, to tell you the truth, sir, it's all along of a letter she lost that's caused my mistress to be so changed. She's been grieving ever since."

"Oh, indeed! Just come outside with me, Hinton."

Hinton complied, and when they were outside the house, Colonel Lythwaite said, "Now, just tell me what you meant this morning when you spoke of that man Case, as he called himself, stealing a letter of your mistress's! Was that the one the loss of which has caused her such anxiety?"

"That's just it, sir," replied Hinton.

And then followed Hinton's account of the manner in which the letter was lost, and of the two visits the stranger had paid to Miss Dyton.

The natural question came next, "And to whom was the letter addressed?"

"To Mr. Seymour Cranleigh, sir," replied Hinton.

"Have you any idea, however remote, as to what that letter contained, Hinton?"

"Not the smallest, sir. My mistress said nothing to me about it," answered the servant, telling, perhaps, the greatest falsehood he had ever uttered in the course of his sixty years.

Nor did he feel many pangs of reproof from his conscience. Indeed, he inwardly applauded himself for his caution, as, it is needless to say that Hinton had eyes and ears like other people, and by this time, having a clear recollection of the visits which Lieutenant Lythwaite used to pay years ago at General Dyton's, and coupling them with *this* visit and Miss Dyton's emotion, the old servant said to himself that he was not going to spoil a happy match by not knowing how to hold his tongue.

"Where does Mr. Cranleigh live?" was Colonel Lythwaite's next question.

"He doesn't live in the place, sir; but he stays on and off at his uncle's, the vicar."

To the vicar's, then, the Colonel next bent his steps, but not till he had questioned Hinton a little more in order that he might discover the hour at which Miss Dyton intended to leave home next morning.

At the Vicarage he learned that Mr. Seymour Cranleigh had been summoned away last night to see a sister who was dangerously ill, and thus it was rendered impossible for him to say to that young man, "About what would it be likely that Miss Dyton should write to you?"

And perhaps it was as well.

But the Colonel had one more thing to do which pressed on him. What he had seen and heard that morning at the Twisted Tree enjoined on him, as he thought, the duty of speaking a word of caution to the youthful girl he had overheard making an appointment with a designing man, for he must surely be designing who had stolen a letter, and whose visits had caused such distress to Constance.

Why had he used the tone he had done to the young lady? Why had he asked her to meet him at dusk? Why was there any mystery about it? True, he, Lancelot Lythwaite, was a stranger to Angelica. Fifteen years ago she was but a baby, while her brother Wilfred was a school-boy; but, all the same, the Seales would remember the name of Lythwaite as that of a visitor who used to come now and then to General Dyton's.

"I'll call at Riversmead, explain that I am revisiting the neighborhood, and feel my way," decided the Colonel, turning his steps thitherward.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE EMPTY HOUSE.

ANGELICA sat alone that evening, alone with her new hopes and fears, and with the many thoughts that thronged into her heart concerning Seymour's affairs. Wilfred and Laura were dining out; thus Angelica had several hours of complete solitude before her, for her brother Harry was still absent on a visit; but her loneliness was made brilliant by the blissful hope that before long Seymour would claim her for his own.

But would he do so, even now that he must feel assured of having won her affection, should he continue poor? Too well she divined that he would refuse to live on her inheritance, ample though it was; and this belief made the young girl doubly anxious to discover what hopes lay in the secret which the mysterious and repellent stranger had pointed to.

She had not failed to send a brief note by that evening's post to Seymour, her first written words to him she secretly loved. How her heart had trembled in the writing them, few as they were, and strictly confined to the business in hand; namely, "had she his permission to hear the secret, or could he come himself to hear it, since the stranger was imperative that there should be no delay?"

Lovers, not yet betrothed—sharing the knowledge of a secret undeclared—the remembrance of his last words, and of his kiss glowing in her heart, while aware that her own family thought of him only as "the poor parson's nephew"—no wonder it was an embarrassment to Angelica to write her letter. And when the few lines were written, how she trembled, as she slipped them herself into the letter-bag, lest Laura should ask what she could have to write to Mr. Cranleigh about?

But that danger was over. Her sister and brother had just driven off for their dinner party—at half-past six o'clock, for it was an hour's drive to their destination.

Angelica's thoughts traveled very far and actively in the short space of time that it took Wilfred and Laura to drive as far as their own park gates, when the scene that morning enacted near the Twisted Tree was forcibly recalled to her notice by the entrance of a servant, bearing a salver.

"If you please, miss, there is a person, named Case, who has just left this note for you," said he.

"Named Case?" echoed Angelica, startled and surprised. "Is he waiting for an answer?"

"No, miss; he only said you would attend to the note if I gave his name."

As the servant withdrew, Angelica's heart beat fast, and yet faster as she perused the missive.

"If you would do a friend's part toward Mr. Seymour Cranleigh, grant me an interview *to-night; to-morrow may be too late*. You will run no risk in so doing, and circumstances have occurred since our meeting this morning, which prevent further delay."

An hour hence I will be in the empty house, and await you. A few moments will be sufficient to explain to you an important matter. How much I now wish I had insisted on confiding in you this morning, that I might have spared you this trouble."

This was all. Angelica read the words twice, feeling overwhelmed with dismay.

To go, at that time of night, to the empty house to meet a stranger! She trembled at the bare idea. And yet how small a thing to do for Seymour's sake!

"To-morrow may be too late!"

Too late! And all because her courage failed at the critical moment! He was not here to go himself; then let her go for him. How foolish to tremble so! After all, it was not so far to go, nor so late, that she need shrink so. She had traversed the road a hundred times by day; the empty house was not very far from home, the stranger was acting in Seymour's interest; so she would go. How fortunate that Laura and Wilfred were absent that evening, else she could not have ventured, but now it would be cowardly to refuse.

As she made this resolve the clock struck a quarter to seven. She was not to be at the rendezvous appointed for an hour. There was plenty of time.

Everybody knows that by about eight o'clock on a moonless night the earliest days of March have quite closed in. It was dark as Angelica, having finished her evening meal, went hurriedly up-stairs, and, shrouding herself in a dark cloak, ran noiselessly down again, then, without pausing to debate further, passed out into the night.

There was no blustering wind, nor was it very cold, neither did she meet with any obstacle on her road. In twenty minutes she neared the empty house, so fast had she sped on her way. To no person could she mention her temporary absence, but she trusted to return very shortly, so that no one need hear that she had been away.

Her flying steps go onward through the gloom. Does no inward presage of danger to his beloved make Seymour Cranleigh feel ready to rush to her side, restless at the distance which divides them? If so, it can little avail the defenseless girl. In a few short moments she will be in the disused dwelling, in the power of a reckless man.

Angelica shivers, and half draws back, as she comes to a momentary pause by the entrance of the house. She starts, and trembles all over, as she catches sight (as she supposes) of a tall, dark figure at an angle of the wall.

Her agitation then becomes so great that she stumbles, and leans for support against the gate. It is at this instant that another figure, quite near her, causes her to start again. A hand is laid on hers, while a voice says in her ear, "Miss Seale?"

She recognizes that voice as that of the man named Case, and replies, "Yes."

Alas! Colonel Lythwaite's good intention of warning her will come too late. Who could have foreseen this sudden move on the part of the person against whom he had resolved to warn her? Nor can Wilfred or Laura dream of danger to their sister such as this. Had they not left her in the safety of home?

"Come this way, or we may be interrupted yet," whispers Case to the young lady. And she unwillingly follows, still ill at ease, and trembling.

The old church clock strikes eight, vibrating through the still air. Angelica thinks of the last time she heard those vibrations, so short a time before, and longs for the safety of that hour.

"Mind the sill of the door," whispers Case. "Allow me to guide you. Now I will procure a light at once, not to detain you."

Angelica feels somewhat reassured as he speaks. Oh, she will run all the way home, when she once more breathes freely, and this dreaded interview is over!

Mr. Case has by this time lighted an end of candle stuck in a bottle, and the dim ray diffused though the empty room is sufficient to show Angelica the peril of her position. For she is absolutely in the power of this unknown



man, who quickly shoots the rusty bolts of the door and turns the key in the lock, saying, "Now, we are safe from intruders, and can talk at ease."

The frightened Angelica casts a hasty glance, full of terror, at the only other exit from the empty apartment—a black doorway leading to another empty room by a door fallen off its hinges. Mr. Case notes this, and is elated with his triumph. How silent it is in this place! Surely she was mad to venture thus alone!

"Will you be as brief as possible?" she asks, in a tremulous tone. "The servants will be greatly surprised at my absence at this hour."

"I will be as brief as you will permit me to be, young lady," replied Mr. Case. "It is not myself, but you, who will terminate this interview. If you consent to do what is needful, I shall not need to detain you."

"I am all attention," faltered Angelica, who was again rendered uneasy by his last words.

"Will you sit? A block of wood is the only seat I can offer you," continued Case. "No? Well, then, to business! First of all, read this letter."

Angelica, reading fast and hurriedly, fearing she knew not what, perused a note he handed her, the note of invitation to Sir Everard and Lady Culhampton, which he had forced from Constance Dyton that same day.

"There must be some mistake! This can have nothing to do with the business you wished to acquaint me with?" said Angelica.

"It has every thing to do with it!" replied Case, "for it is a proof that I have gained the ear of a well-known and respected lady of this neighborhood, one who is on friendly terms, too, with your own family. She consents to aid me in my efforts to restore to Mr. Seymour Cranleigh an inheritance, which, but for my discoveries, could never have been his. She wrote that note at my suggestion this afternoon, in order that during the absence of Sir Everard and his wife from home I might be able to act. See; I have the key to a concealed receptacle in Sir Everard's library—a key intrusted to me by a relative of Sir Everard's! Let me but open one drawer in that library, and Seymour Cranleigh will be a rich man, a millionaire!"

"And what do you ask me to do?" said Angelica.

"Listen! All will be well and safely accomplished if you will consent to aid me but for two short hours. You must contrive to call alone on Lady Culhampton on the very day when you know her to be absent. When I say alone, I mean without your sister or any other friend. Then I will join you on the way, and shall be admitted as a friend accompanying you. Of course we shall be told that Lady Culhampton is not at home. Of course you will express your regrets, and then you will ask permission to show me one of the pictures in the library, as I am an artist, we will say. The rest is easy. Once in the library, you must next feign sudden indisposition, and beg to be left to rest for a quarter of an hour before returning home. You can seat yourself on a sofa, lean your head on your hand, and resist all well-meant efforts to move you from the room. The natural consequence will be that we shall be left alone for a short time, as the servants know you, and I shall be supposed to be a visitor at your brother's. Then I at once apply the key, discover the secret drawer, take out the concealed papers, and Seymour Cranleigh is a rich man!"

A thousand contending emotions struggled in Angelica's heart as he spoke; but loudest of all was the voice which rose up telling her not to do this thing. It was necessary, perhaps, to reclaim the papers, but not in that way, surely! Seymour himself would be the more proper person to be present, if they belonged to him. Or a magistrate might be applied to. How could she call at Lady Culhampton's with this stranger? How could she be really sure Seymour's interests were this man's actual

motives for asking her to aid in this robbery of papers?

"Mr. Case," said she, as resolutely as she could, "it would be impossible for me to do as you suggest. Even if it appeared to me the right course (which it does not), the servant who would accompany me if I rode over to Lady Culhampton's would be surprised to see me joined by a stranger and a gentleman. If I drove over, my sister would be sure to accompany me; whereas, if Mr. Seymour Cranleigh called with you it would excite no remark. I will send him a telegram, but surely a day or two will make no difference." She forbore to add that she did not believe Mr. Cranleigh would consent to possess himself of the papers in the manner proposed.

"A day or two will make a most serious difference. He may lose the papers altogether!" cried Case, angrily.

"I will send a telegram," repeated Angelica, growing somewhat paler.

"You will do no such thing!" cried Case.

Angelica, overwhelmed by fear, was silent for a moment. Then she said, "It is getting late; I must go home at once. I will write to you in the morning, Mr. Case, if you will give me an address at which a letter will reach you."

"No! We must arrange matters to-night!" cried he. "I tell you I would have settled it myself without aid, but for the army of dogs kept about that place of Sir Everard's! Are you a friend of Seymour Cranleigh's and do you refuse to do a simple thing such as I have proposed? By Heaven, I will take no refusal!"

"I must really leave you now," said the trembling girl.

"Leave? That remains with me to decide!" he rejoined. "Just now you remarked on the lateness of the hour. How shall you like to find yourself here at three o'clock in the morning? At five? But here you will be. You do not leave this place at all until I have accomplished what I desire! I shall listen to no promises now; they would come too late—a good deal too late! Since you have lost the chance of acting with me as a friend you must now help me, your enemy, *against* your will!"

Angelica was speechless. Terror was gaining upon her with every word she listened to.

"Kneel down, and write what I shall dictate. Kneel, and use the block for the table!" continued Case, with diabolical coolness.

Could she scream? A wild idea of uttering shriek after shriek rushed into the mind of the defenseless girl; but it died away again.

The house was so lonely, so fearfully lonely. People seldom took this route to the Vicarage by night, preferring another and a more frequented path.

At this hour who would pass that way? And, besides, Angelica had the frightful conviction that this reckless man would strike her down and silence her if she dared to utter a cry.

"Obey! Write!" said he, threateningly.

Angelica's brain reeled.

"I will leave you when you have written what I shall dictate—not before," said he.

"I must give the alarm afterward. Only let me get home, and Wilfred can prevent any mischief," thought the tortured girl.

Home! Ah! But she was not yet in that haven of peace and safety! She was here alone—entirely alone in this deserted building, where no cry of hers would bring help!

"Write!" said Case, menacingly, producing pen, ink and paper. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," replied she, faintly.

"Dear Lady Culhampton," said Case, dictating, "you will do me a very great kindness by permitting the bearer of this note to have access to your library for an hour. My brother knows him well as a most deserving man and a rising artist. He is engaged on a picture ordered by Lord Marsden—so you will see from this he is a well-known man—and wishes to introduce into it a figure from one of your paintings, of the beauty of which he has heard."

"Time is very important to Mr. Beaver, the gen-

tleman in question; so that may I ask, even if he presents this at an early hour, he may be admitted?"

How did her trembling fingers form the words? She managed the task, only supported by the thought that she would so present matters to Wilfred to-night, that he himself would send to warn Lady Culhampton. Only let her get home!

"Conclude in proper fashion, and let me read it," said her jailer.

Angelica did so.

"Ha, ha! Armed with this, I think I shall manage my affairs alone, my dear young lady! This is really all I want of you now."

"Then I will at once go home," she answered, with a dreadful presentiment that he would oppose some obstacle still.

"I regret to spoil your anticipations. You will go home, no doubt, and be very glad to get there; but you cannot go just yet—not till to-morrow some time. I am sorry to leave you here, but I can assure you that you have nothing to fear. No one will come here, for the country people believe the place haunted. Oh, you will have quiet hours to get through!" (He was fumbling in his pockets as he spoke.)

"Now, my dear young lady," he added, "a gag and a pair of handcuffs will finish the matter. I regret to use them, but I am forced, otherwise you might scream, or release yourself when once my back was turned. Should you venture to scream while I am here, I shall speedily stop it. Allow me to put on the handcuffs; but let me just run my eye over the note before I do so. Something occurs to me that you might add."

Unhappy Angelica! Of what use was the wild glance she sent into the black gloom of the inner apartment?

## CHAPTER X.

COLONEL LYTHWAITE.

WE must go back a little while—an hour or two in the course of this history.

We left Colonel Lythwaite on his way to Riversmead.

It was late when he arrived there—somewhat too late for any but an intimate friend to present himself; yet he rung the bell and asked for Mr. Seale, and was told that he had not long since driven off with Miss Seale to a dinner-party.

"I must call in the course of to-morrow, or rather immediately after breakfast, since I must not lose sight of my darling Constance," thought he. (Ah! how much was to happen before that to-morrow!)

The Colonel had turned from the door, when he met a man who was evidently going up to the house, but whose slinking air and cautious step excited attention, and suspicion also. The next instant the Colonel gave a start. "I have seen that fellow elsewhere," thought he. "Ah! I know where. By the Twisted Tree, this very morning!"

Swift as light it next occurred to Colonel Lythwaite that the man had chosen this hour to confer with the young lady, now that her brother and sister were absent.

An uneasy feeling made Miss Dyton's lover pause and watch this mysterious stranger. He felt unwilling to go on and leave him there. Let him at least ascertain how long he stayed, and whither he went.

Colonel Lythwaite had not to remain many minutes on the watch, for Case returned by the same path almost immediately.

"I'll see where he lodges," was the instant thought which shot into the Colonel's mind.

Mr. Case was wholly unconscious that as he took a route across the fields, his footsteps were dogged. When he at length, after many turns by by-paths, reached the empty house, Colonel Lythwaite grew more suspicious. What did he want there? Above all, why did he slink about as if he did not wish to be seen?

Quietly taking up a position near the house, the Colonel considered the course to take, and was surprised to see the man continually reappear, as if he expected some one.



"I'll wait to see the end of this," resolved the Colonel.

Some time passed, and still he lingered in the shadow of the night. As eight o'clock struck, a light footstep was distinguishable, and a slight figure came up to the gate; the man hurried out, and those few words were exchanged between Angelica and the stranger which we have recorded above.

"Good heavens! It is that beautiful girl, the youngest Miss Seale! I must protect her at any hazard," decided Colonel Lythwaite; "though I will not hear her secret."

Creeping after them, then, he entered with them the empty building, gliding out of sight into a room adjoining the apartment where Case and the young lady came to a standstill; for while Case struck a light the Colonel disappeared, he being on the alert for a hiding-place, and having to aid him a clear recollection of this old house, to which, years ago, he had often come with General Dyton, who at that time owned it, and to whose tenant—it was let to a broken-down officer—the General showed many kindnesses. But when the tenant died, the house was sold, and had almost ever since stood empty.

Creeping along by the wall to the furthest end of the room, out of the chance of hearing another's secret, Colonel Lythwaite came to the resolution not to reveal his presence unless it were necessary, but to listen to the slightest sign of distress from the young lady.

Thus Angelica had an unknown protector very near her, but he overheard nothing of her conference with Case—was unaware of his threats, and of her cruel terror.

"Add this line to your note," said Case, coolly, as he hastily looked over the words she had written; "that I once rendered your family a great service, so that, in obliging me, Lady Culhampton confers a favor on yourself."

But Angelica, perceiving that she should have no power to warn the Culhamptons, that she would be playing into the hands of a man wholly unscrupulous, and that things could hardly be worse with her, took the pen as if to obey him; then, with a wild shriek, rushed through the adjoining doorway.

Perchance she might evade this man in the darkness, and by flying from room to room gain time. Her screams might yet be heard by some passer-by; rescue might come at the last moment. At any rate, nothing could be hoped for when once those cruel handcuffs were on, and her cries were stopped by the dreadful gag. And so she fled from the room, uttering a piercing cry.

After her, with a wild oath, went her pursuer.

"Idiot!" he ejaculated, as he came up with her flying form. "Do you think to escape me here? Take the consequences of your own folly!"

He had raised his hand to strike down the young lady.

She was at bay; for there was no outlet from that room, when, by a blow, he himself was felled, and lay prostrate, cut and bruised.

"Fear nothing more, Miss Seale. I concealed myself here to protect you, though, be assured, I have heard nothing, not a word, of the secret which I am aware this fellow was to reveal to you," cried Colonel Lythwaite.

This sudden deliverance was so unlooked-for, that, though it was like life restored to her, it came with a shock to Angelica.

She leaned against the wall, and burst into tears, clinging to the arm of her protector.

The wretch at her feet moved and groaned.

Colonel Lythwaite looked down on him, and said, "Dare so much as to make an effort to rise, and you shall repent it bitterly. Has he been threatening you?" asked he, turning to Angelica.

"Yes, yes! He was about to handcuff me—to gag me!" replied the poor girl excitedly.

"Ah! Then suppose we use his own weapons against himself?"

And, kneeling down, the Colonel succeeded in making the hands of the ruffian secure.

"I will escort you home in a few minutes, Miss Seale," he then remarked, calmly, as he performed this task. "It will be necessary that I should secure this man first, however, by binding his legs. I will then search him, and let the police do the rest. He will account to them for a letter stolen from Miss Dyton's servant, and for his conduct to you."

"Mercy!" groaned the man. "If you will not go to the police, I will tell you the truth about that letter."

"It is now my duty to go. It is too late!" answered the Colonel frigidly.

"Will you take a message, then, for me to the lady—to Miss Dyton—before you charge me? Will you do as much as that?"

"Yes; I will do as much as that," replied Colonel Lythwaite, remembering all that seemed to hang on the discovery of that letter. Would its recovery stop the flight of Constance—save her from ridicule?

"You swear it?"

"I swear it!" replied the Colonel.

"Well, then, I am helpless, or I would make better terms. But the truth about that letter is this. I never had it at all! Her own servant must still have it, or he has lost it. I overheard his soliloquy respecting it—based on supposition—and boldly acted as if I knew the contents. In return for my information, say to Miss Dyton that she must do something for me now. She must intercede for me with you. She knows what passed between us; but is my anxiety to secure an inheritance for an ill-used man, who, but for my zeal in his behalf, would never have heard of what, by right, should be his own—is that to be punished as you would punish me? Remember, I am not to gain any thing for myself. Release me, and I will prove it!"

It was specious reasoning; but the matter looked dark on the face of it.

"Why, then, go about a good deed in such a manner?" demanded the Colonel. "Inveigling a lady into such a place as this by night, terrifying her with threats, and then producing handcuffs and a gag to coerce her! In all this there is something I do not understand. Explain it, if you can; though no explanation can make it pardonable."

"When one is too eager about a thing, when one is assured, as I am, that delay may lose an inheritance, one is tempted to use unpardonable means. Go to Miss Dyton! She will tell you what I said to her," replied Case.

"Who are you, then?" asked the Colonel.

"Who? I am a distant connection of young Seymour Cranleigh's, a friend of Sir Everard's eccentric brother (Cranleigh's godfather), who lately died abroad in Madagascar. To me he confided the secret of the whereabouts of the will purposely hidden from Sir Everard, who would lose the fair demesne and rich lands of Brooksmere if this testament were produced. Every instant's delay is fatal. You have forced me to reveal the truth, that I may fulfill the last instructions of a dying man; on you be the crime, if you are the means of hindering that dying wish from being carried out. Sir Everard will burn the will if he gets the smallest inkling of its existence. His greed is pretty well credited."

It was too true. Sir Everard was a miserly man. He had not succeeded many months to the baronetcy of Culhampton; and it was only ten weeks since news had arrived of the death of an eccentric younger brother of his, a great traveler, who passed his life in wandering, and who had been almost as wealthy as Sir Everard himself.

This brother, Mr. Seymour Culhampton, had been godfather to Seymour Cranleigh, but of late years had taken no notice whatever of his godson, and on his death (no will being discoverable) the whole of Mr. Culhampton's large property, together with an estate called Brooksmere, had passed to Sir Everard.

At the time of this occurrence, people had

smiled, remarking that the Baronet would be consoled by Brooksmere for the loss of his relative.

Colonel Lythwaite knew enough of Sir Everard's character by repute to make him give partial credit to the story told by Case, while Angelica was entirely ready to believe it, she having heard all the comments made when tidings arrived in England of Mr. Culhampton's death.

"Are you ready to accompany me to Miss Dyton's now, this moment?" asked the Colonel—"ready to be searched, in order to allay suspicion?"

"Quite ready," answered Case.

"Then I will free your hands of these things, and accompany you to Dyton Lodge, after I have seen Miss Seale to her own gates. We shall have to go first to Riversmead. I can only regret very much that you have thought it necessary to proceed as you have done, if you are really acting in the interests of right and justice. But these interests must be secured in another manner. This young lady's brother, I have little doubt, will consent to accompany you and myself to-morrow to Sir Everard's; I shall then beg the Baronet to allow us to enter his library; without explaining more, you can open this secret drawer in his presence, produce the will in the sight of witnesses, when justice to Mr. Cranleigh must follow. I will now assist you to rise, but you will be in my custody."

With a smothered exclamation expressive of pain, Mr. Case arose, for he was much bruised. He put his hand to his breast as if he suffered from his fall. The candle was on the point of expiring as Angelica, still shaken and trembling, followed her protector and his captive from the empty house.

As she did so, the light flared up before expiring, revealing to the young girl's gaze a letter lying on the dusty floor on one side. She hastily picked it up, believing this to be the letter she herself had just been forced to write, and, without speaking, hurried out.

Nine o'clock struck as the three reached the highway—only one hour since Angelica had entered the empty house, yet an age of agony seemed to have passed since then.

In truth, she was now consumed by anxiety to be at home again. After what had occurred, she must of course tell Laura and Wilfred all. But not to-night—she had suffered so much! Oh, to regain home before the servants discovered her absence. They need never be told what had happened, surely!

In silence, save a few broken thanks uttered by Angelica to the Colonel, they traversed the path to Riversmead; the rescued girl flew up the carriage drive, found the entrance door merely closed as she had left it, and once more was at home!

## CHAPTER XI.

### A SURPRISE FOR CONSTANCE.

It was ten o'clock when the troubled mistress of Dyton Lodge was roused from her sorrowful task of looking round at the objects she valued, and deciding which she would keep, by a sharp summons at the house door. She listened (she was still in the library), and then Hinton opened the door.

"If you please, ma'am, Colonel Lythwaite and Mr. Case have called on very urgent business."

"At this hour!" exclaimed Miss Dyton, changing color (every thing alarmed her in the agitation she was in).

"Shall I show them in, ma'am, or tell them to call to-morrow?"

To-morrow? Constance could not count on that to-morrow.

"Show them in, Hinton," said she, sighing very wearily; and Colonel Lythwaite, who had left her in such lover-like fashion so short a time ago, entered, his arm linked in that of Case.

"This must seem a very strange proceeding to you, my dear Miss Dyton," began he; "but I have had an extremely strange adventure



since you and I parted. This gentleman, for a few hours only, I trust, is my prisoner. I will account to you for my conduct very shortly; but, first, may I try to recover a letter which, it seems, you suppose is in the possession of Mr. Case?"

Hinton had lingered full of curiosity; while Constance became covered with confusion. That fatal letter!

"Madam, I never had that letter, I assure you!" said Case. "In return for this assurance, which is the honest truth, consent to hear me in my own defense! Let my anxiety to set a wrong matter right plead for me!"

"Never had the letter!" cried Hinton, in his surprise; "then what became of it?"

"Are you sure you dropped it, Hinton?" asked Colonel Lythwaite.

"Sure, sir! Why, yes, sir! That is, I never doubted but I'd dropped it, sir!" exclaimed Hinton, his face becoming rubicund with extreme agitation, as he dived into one pocket after another, his countenance growing of a deeper dye; while the eyes of those present were fastened on him with anxiety.

Hinton had given the third thrust into his third pocket, when—together with a knife and other articles—out fell the letter.

Constance uttered a scream of joy. She had barely strength to snatch it up, and could scarcely credit her own sight which showed her the envelope—still secure, still unopened!

No one but her then had ever read those lines! She was saved from ridicule; need not fly from the laughter of her neighbors; and the relief to her was so great that she burst into convulsive sobs, in which grief mingled with her thankfulness. For though saved from exposure, she knew she could not undo her deed; could not marry Colonel Lythwaite, her old and faithful lover!

She would never have the courage to confess to him what she had done; she would not marry him without confessing; and if she could have the hardihood to own the truth, he must despise her!

"Is it all right?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes, yes; I have the letter!" she answered, thrusting it out of sight till she could be alone to destroy it.

"I'm sure I hope you'll forgive me for my mistake, ma'am!" said Hinton. "You see, ma'am, I was so startled by catching sight of a light in that empty house, that I must have slipped the letter into my pocket before I sprung up to the window. Dear, dear! I'm more sorry than I can tell you, ma'am."

"What did you mean by saying you acted on conjecture?" asked Constance, suddenly addressing Case, and turning very pale. "I am unable to understand what grounds you had to form any conjectures as to the contents of my letter."

"Ask your servant, there!" said Case. "He was so much chagrined at the loss of it that he soliloquized aloud. It is he who formed conjectures, and I who acted on them. He was deploring that his mistress should throw herself away, etc. I will add no more."

"Hinton, I am surprised, and sorely displeased!" said Miss Dyton. "It is very hard—"

But here she stopped short. How could she justify herself save by a falsehood?

Hinton, overwhelmed, murmured "that he was out-of-the-way grieved."

"We shall not now intrude on you any longer," said the Colonel; "but may I ask your permission that your servant may go with Mr. Case and myself to the Vicarage, as Mr. Case is virtually in my custody till we have concluded some urgent business in the morning."

Constance, of course, gave her consent; and the Colonel having asked if she was aware that Mr. Case was anxious to secure some property for Mr. Cranleigh, pressed her hand most tenderly, and withdrew, leaving her alone to her joy and pain.

At first, relief predominated. She looked round at the familiar things of home, and

sobbed again with delight that she could still dwell among them.

The letter still lay hidden in her pocket; she shrunk from looking again at the cause of so much trouble, and yet she resolved that she would once more read those fatal lines before she destroyed them.

Then her thoughts followed Colonel Lythwaite. He would make her far—far happier than Seymour Cranleigh could ever have done, for she was certain of his devotion; there was no disparity of age! Oh, why, by her own act, had she separated herself from him?

Time flew by as she mused. Three-quarters of an hour passed, and how much longer she would have sat there no one can tell, if she had not been suddenly startled by the noise of wheels, and another ring at the house-bell.

No one could come at that hour with so imperative a summons without a cause!

Constance went herself hurriedly into the hall. As she did so she heard a girlish voice, full of emotion, pronounce Colonel Lythwaite's name—a voice she recognized, surely.

Constance quickened her step, and came face to face with Angelica.

"Oh, is he here?" cried the latter, seizing the hand of Miss Dyton. "Is Colonel Lythwaite here?"

"No; he is at the Vicarage, I believe," replied Constance.

"Then I must go to him at once—at once! I took a carriage, and came off immediately," added Angelica.

"May I go with you?" asked Constance, much excited, though not comprehending what had happened.

"Ah, thank you!" exclaimed the girl, again seizing her hand. "Let us go—let us not lose a moment!"

Miss Dyton threw on a cloak, and followed Angelica into the carriage, which instantly was driven off to the Vicarage.

"I have discovered such a plot—such a frightful plot!" continued Angelica, shivering with emotion. "Do you know what has happened to-night? Has Colonel Lythwaite told you?"

Constance said, "No."

And Angelica, in a disjointed fashion, made her acquainted with the meeting in the empty house, and all that had followed.

"But when I reached home," said Angelica, her voice thrilling with the emotion she felt, "I was at first too much worried and anxious to think of anything except whether our servants had discovered my absence, so I rung and asked at what hour my brother had ordered the carriage to bring him and Laura home. Perceiving no surprise in the servant's looks, I was re-assured, and when he had withdrawn took from my pocket the letter which I had picked up on leaving the empty house, intending to place it in my desk, in order to show it to Wilfred at another time; not to-night, for I knew how angry he would feel at the threats used toward me—so angry that he might refuse to co-operate with Mr. Case at all."

"In smoothing it out I perceived my mistake. Imagine my terror at discovering that that dreadful man Case is deceiving us all in the basest manner. What I have found is a letter evidently written to a brother of his in Liverpool, who has all in readiness for their flight to America after Case has accomplished his dark deed. And you will never guess who he really is."

"Who?—who?" cried Constance, scarcely less moved than Angelica.

"He is a courier engaged by Mr. Seymour Culhampton at Cairo. The allusions in the letter make this plain. Don't you remember how much Lady Culhampton regretted that her brother-in-law refused to engage any traveling attendant in England? That he did so abroad is evident; and that he fell into the power of a most unprincipled man without being aware of it. Poor gentleman! feeling himself dying, he must have intrusted to this man his last letters and messages for his family, and a deep-laid plot has been the result."

"But is there any property left to Mr. Seymour Cranleigh?" asked Constance. "Is there any concealed will?"

"Yes, yes; but the baseness of this courier exceeds belief. It seems that the eccentric Mr. Culhampton put a sum of ten thousand pounds in notes into the same place with his will; that this money was intended for the sole use of Mr. Seymour Cranleigh; but that the latter was to be kept in profound ignorance of it till the testator's death. Learning this secret from the few lines penned with difficulty by the dying Seymour Culhampton to his godson, the courier formed the design of seizing the ten thousand pounds, and keeping that bequest an eternal secret; but he intended to produce the will, and earn a large reward for so doing from Seymour Cranleigh, who would benefit by it. It really appears that the Baronet, though distrusted by his brother, has no knowledge of this hidden will. The letter has revealed all. The writer exults in the trickery he is carrying out, ridicules your fears, and speaks boldly of the ease with which he could draw me into an ambush. It was all planned. He intended to lure me to the empty house, and only pretended to give me another meeting at the Twisted Tree. Colonel Lythwaite at present believes he is dealing with a man eager to set an affair of property right—believes that Case is a relative or connection of Mr. Cranleigh's. He must be made aware of the truth instantly. I ordered a carriage, and came off at once, leaving a message for Laura that something had occurred to make it imperative for me to go to Dyton Lodge to-night. Oh, here we are at the Vicarage! Oh, that to-night were over!"

We pass over the amazement of Colonel Lythwaite at sight of Angelica, and of Constance, and of his wonder as he listened apart to the tale they told.

"Hush! let us not deceive the wretched fellow to-night. To-morrow will be soon enough, and he will be less ready to escape," whispered the Colonel. "No doubt he still hopes that, in showing us where the will is hidden, he may possess himself of the ten thousand pounds, or, failing that, he may earn our gratitude, secure some reward, and get off scot free. He must have been quick to throw away from him that tell-tale letter as soon as he found he had been caught."

"Ah, I remember he put his hand to his heart as if in pain," replied Angelica, in an equally low tone, "as he professed his willingness to be searched!"

The object of debate was in the adjoining apartment, under the supervision of Seymour's uncle and Hinton, and it was not thought necessary to enlighten him respecting the visit of the two ladies.

Colonel Lythwaite accompanied them to the carriage, whispering as he did so, "I shall see you to-morrow."

Wilfred and Laura, driving up to their own door, were extremely surprised to find another carriage following theirs, which they soon recognized as one of the Riversmead carriages. When both stopped, their surprise increased to amazement to see Angelica get out of the vehicle which had been driving after them. Her paleness, her changed aspect, told them at once that something very unusual had happened.

"What is it, my dear girl?" asked Wilfred and Laura together.

"Oh, Wilfred! oh, Laura!" cried she, drawing them apart; "you must not be angry, for to-night I have suffered so much, and I had no idea of the real danger I ran; and—and—for I must tell you the truth now—I did not do it for myself; it was for Seymour Cranleigh!"

"Danger, Angelica?" exclaimed Wilfred. "No, I will not scold you. If you cannot speak out to your own brother, it would be a grievous thing."

"Oh, tell us all, for we do care for you!" cried Laura, taking her sister's hands.

Angelica burst into tears, perhaps the best thing she could have done under the circum-



stances, and with her head buried on her brother's shoulder, related the exciting events of the past day or two, aided by judicious questions from Wilfred whenever she paused. The latter exchanged with Laura, unseen by Angelica, a very meaning glance at the renewed mention of Seymour's name, which Laura quite understood to convey, "So she loves that penniless young fellow, does she?"

But the elder brother and sister were too deeply concerned at Angelica's grief and excitement to say a word to distress her just then, so the recital was got through, and Wilfred jumped up, saying, "I wish we could go this very moment to disprove or to verify that wretched man's statement. If it is correct as far as the bequest to Seymour Cranleigh goes, why, then, Cranleigh will be a very fortunate man, in more ways than one, I suspect. There, Angelica, you know what I mean. I see that he has been trying to win your affection; and if he is to succeed to the Brooksmere estate, he will have a chance to ask for it. But if not—"

"If not, Wilfred, dear," said Angelica, raising her head, "I shall still be very happy, for then—then—"

She became too much confused to finish her sentence, and Laura added for her, "She means that she will marry him without a penny. Girls are so foolish. No, no, my dear; you must not think of Seymour Cranleigh, unless he can show us he has some sort of an income." At which Angelica burst anew into sobs, and Wilfred insisted that she should go to rest.

## CHAPTER XII.

### FURTHER TIDINGS.

BUT what rest could she take with the thought haunting her of what the morning must decide? It was true that her relatives could not forever separate her from Seymour if he asked her hand. But he and she would have to wait at least three years for their wedding, and such a time appears to the young, and to those who love, an eternity. Then, again, Seymour might never again ask her to marry him if he continued in his present condition. Had he not expressed his opinion decidedly that, being poor, he would not wed a wealthy bride?

The thought surged up into Angelica's mind of the privilege which Leap Year is supposed to give to a lady; but it was not compatible with Angelica's nature to put such a privilege into practice.

"He might—he would—refuse my hand even then, since it is against his *principle* to marry me, because I am rich; and such a rejection would kill me!" thought Angelica.

Sleep, too, had fled from the eyes of Constance.

"I shall see you to-morrow," Colonel Lythwaite had whispered to her.

But of what avail was such an interview, since she had decided that they must part? The fatal letter, still unopened, lay in her pocket. She had not yet had courage to read again the lines she had written.

As to Angelica, she fell into a troubled sleep toward morning, awaking with a start as her maid entered.

"Is my brother up?" cried she.

"Oh, yes, miss," replied the domestic. "Mr. Seale has hardly gone to bed all night, I think. He went to the Vicarage last night, and stayed very late, miss. It was two o'clock when he got home; and he drove off with two gentlemen early this morning—to Sir Everard Culhampton's, I believe.

"Gone already?" questioned Angelica.

"Yes, miss; and Miss Laura begged me to say, with her love, that she hoped you wouldn't rise if you were fatigued this morning, and that Mr. Seale had sent a telegram to summon Mr. Seymour Cranleigh, as he thought Mr. Cranleigh ought to be on the spot."

"Indeed!" was all the reply given by the young lady.

But her lovely countenance, still pale with the emotions of yesterday, grew rose-red with blushes at the mention of Seymour.

"He will come! Wilfred and he will speak together! Oh, what will be the result?"

Angelica did not remain in her own room; she soon joined Laura below.

"You foolish child!" cried the latter, as she entered the breakfast-room. "Never do any thing again without telling us first! I shudder to remember what danger you were in last night! Wilfred was quite overcome when he dwelt on it. He and Colonel Lythwaite have sworn eternal friendship. And have you heard the news, Angelica? The Colonel is devoted to Constance Dyton; he told Wilfred all his hopes dwelt with her! I hope she will have the wit to see what a noble personage she has won, and not dream of somebody else, for there is no chance for her with *him*, I see!"

An hour, two hours went by very slowly, at the expiration of which some one rung at the door, and Mr. Seymour Cranleigh was announced.

Angelica's heart throbbed fast; she blushed deeply, but rose quietly from her seat beside Laura to greet their visitor.

And Laura could perceive her suppressed emotion, her tremor, her trouble of heart.

And was Seymour unmoved? So far from that, he could only press the hand of his beloved in silence.

"How did you leave your sister, Mr. Cranleigh?" said Laura, in the most matter-of-fact way.

"Better—much better," I am thankful to say," faltered Seymour.

"I am so glad you were able to come," added Laura. "We have a great deal to tell you."

She was very affable to this young man, so well-born and handsome, who, for aught she knew, might take a place in the county, and be the owner of Brooksmere; but, for all that, she determined not to leave him alone for one moment with Angelica till his position was secure.

"She will have to forget him, if this story turns out a myth!" mused Laura.

They chatted on, if that could be called conversing which consisted of agitated questioning from one of the party, and almost total silence on the other. But Laura kept up a show of ease, and told the story of last night in a forcible manner.

"My fate, then, is to be decided to-day," said Seymour, with emotion, when at length she had finished, and he had recovered somewhat from his horror at the position from which Angelica had been rescued.

He glanced at the young girl as he spoke, and for a moment their gaze met; his expressive of unutterable affection; hers, averted, full of timidity and sorrow.

Which felt the most at that moment? It would be hard to say! And as the young lovers thus silently gazed, a noise of wheels was heard, and a carriage drove furiously to the door. "I do believe it is Wilfred! What news can he bring?" exclaimed Laura, who was the only one of the party able to speak.

Forgetting (in her eagerness to be assured of the result of his journey) that if she left the room Angelica and Seymour would find themselves together, Laura ran out of the library, down the long corridor, and into the outer hall, where the carriage had just drawn up.

In an instant Seymour was on his knees beside Angelica, her hands pressed fervently to his lips.

"Beloved," he murmured, "if I remain a poor man, let me at least lay my heart's devotion at your feet—the sole thing which I can offer you—a love which possesses my whole being! I shall carry it with me into exile, if my poverty divides us—carry it with me through life, and to the life beyond the grave!"

And then even the timid Angelica took courage. She had but a moment to whisper, as she returned for one instant his fervent gaze, "And if you must be poor, I shall be as proud,

as supremely blest to have won your love, as if you possessed a thousand Brooksmeres! To no other shall I ever give my hand if you will that your want of wealth is to divide us!"

Oh, enraptured Seymour! At her low-spoken words, his soul thrilled with delight. His heart rose to meet whatever fortune had in store for him. Had he not won all, in winning the treasure of her love? The small things of life dwindled out of sight in the golden light of this overpowering bliss.

They had but a moment to unclasp hands, when hurried steps approached the door, and Wilfred entered, followed by Laura, Mr. Cranleigh, the clergyman, Sir Everard Culhampton and Colonel Lythwaite.

Seymour stood, outwardly calm and unmoved, to hear the sentence of wealth or poverty, which they brought him. A light was on his brow. He looked at them, but asked no question, for his heart was still throbbing with the remembrance of Angelica's words.

"Well, I must say, you take it coolly, Cranleigh!" cried Wilfred. "Don't you want to know how matters have gone?"

"Come, Seale, you are too bad!" said Sir Everard, pressing forward. "Seymour I congratulate you, though I am myself the loser of a fine estate. There was the will sure enough; and crushed behind it, as much out of sight as possible, was the envelope containing the bank-notes."

"Yes, you are the owner of Brooksmere," said Laura; "and most heartily do I wish you joy."

Her voice had assumed a cordiality it lacked before.

She was ready now to leave her sister alone with this young man—ready to welcome him as a brother. For now he was wealthy enough to wed her sister.

They all shook hands with him, except Angelica, who only murmured some broken words of congratulation.

"Well, do tell me where that wretched man, Case, is?" cried Laura, presently. "What happened when he knew of his tell-tale letter having been found?"

"Ah! there was such a scene! He was unprepared for that," said Colonel Lythwaite.

"Just tell me a little in detail," rejoined Laura.

"Imagine us, then, in that long library at Culhampton, the Baronet here amazed at our entrance in a body just at breakfast-time, accompanied by a stranger. He at once courteously escorted us to the room in question. Case had grown very pale. When we got opposite to the writing table he turned and addressed the Baronet. 'I am about to fulfill a promise made to your brother, on his death-bed, Sir Everard,' said he.

"Then, with fingers trembling so much that he could barely apply the key, he opened the drawer, touched a spring, and a secret receptacle was revealed.

"I am to complete the accomplishment of my promise to the dying by examining these papers," remarked Case. 'Allow me to glance at them for a moment.'

"With clever sleight of hand, he thrust one envelope out of sight. Had I not been watching him narrowly, he might, perchance, have gone off with the ten thousand pounds. Never shall I lose the remembrance of the change which came over him as I stepped forward, and, tapping him quietly on the shoulder, said, 'I will relieve you of the charge of those bank-notes, Mr. Courier. I know all, you see.'

"The man collapsed on the spot. His coolness vanished; he had become abject in a few seconds. Not a word could he muster, but ashen white, dropped onto a chair, half-fainting. The game he had played was lost.

"See, gentlemen," said I, 'this envelope is addressed to Mr. Seymour Cranleigh, and these words are added:—'For my godson, Seymour Cranleigh, on my death, by which time I shall have discovered how he has set about carving his own fortune. There is nothing like letting a young man depend on his own efforts to



start with; it brings out the stuff he is made of."

"Now," said I, turning to Case, "you see I am acquainted with your villainy. Answer my questions with truth if you would hope for a shade of mercy!"

"The abject fellow cried out that he would confess everything. He had taken advantage of his master's illness and death in Madagascar to possess himself of all his papers, and had used poor Mr. Culhampton's enforced confidence to plan the robbery of the ten thousand pounds which the eccentric gentleman had placed with his will instead of at his banker's. It seems he fancied a bank might break, but that in that secret drawer the money would be in safety. This fortune Case meant to make his own; but he intended to discover the will, and ask a reward for doing so, which he was pretty sure of obtaining. When chance willed it that he should treat with an inexperienced girl, he made bold moves, and but for a recognition of him by myself, might have secured your fortune, Mr. Seymour. He is now on his road to prison, where he will have time to meditate on his past deeds."

"But I must see the man. What did he mean by speaking of 'certain mysteries in my family?'" asked Seymour. "Of all the people in the world, I believe my own kith and kin to have nothing to do with mysteries."

"He invented them on the spur of the moment to draw you on. We have done with dark secrets, and have only to be happy, I trust," concluded the Colonel. "Miss Seale, I must take leave of you now; but I hope you will permit me to call and inquire for you and Miss Angelica to-morrow."

"With the greatest pleasure," responded Laura. "But, Colonel Lythwaite, do remain with us now! We can put you up, and will send for your luggage anywhere."

"Ten thousand thanks!" he rejoined; "but I am very anxious to see an old friend." And, resisting all entreaties, he made his adieux, and departed—whither? Where could his faithful steps turn save to Dyton Lodge? "You need not announce me, Hinton. I will bear any blame," said he, on presenting himself at the door. "I have business with Miss Dyton."

"Very well, sir," replied Hinton, forming his own conjectures.

And this is how it happened that Constance was surprised, in tears, as she was holding in her hand that letter which had been the cause of all her woe.

"Constance!"

She looked up through her tears, and there, before her, stood the Colonel.

"I—I said I was not at home!" she faltered, rising in haste and confusion, while endeavoring to hide the letter.

He passed his arm around her, saying, "My dear love, we are neither of us happy; I have been very faithful; reward me at last!"

"I—I am unworthy!" cried she, melting into tears.

"This is absurd. Have courage. Tell me what troubles you, and then we will cast sorrow behind us!"

"That letter!" she murmured.

"Let me read it!" said he, taking it from her hand.

"No—oh, no! It would kill me!" she cried, trembling violently.

"Constance, I will never do anything to trouble you! May I burn it without reading it—here, in your presence?" urged he.

"No!" she rejoined, with sudden resolve.

"Let me leave you, and then you shall read it alone. You have been so noble, so faithful, that I will do what lays in me to dispel your illusion concerning me. You will then find happiness at a later day in some other manner than by passing your life with me; and, perhaps, a great while to come, you will not despise me! Read this; but I charge you not to open it—not to read even the first line till I have left you. Then destroy it, quit this house, and let us never meet again!"

He allowed her to leave him; but she had scarcely reached the top of the stairs when he regained her side.

"Constance, I still claim you!" he cried, clasping her in his arms.

And so he did not leave her; and, in three months from that time, they two were married.

People said that Miss Dyton looked twenty-five instead of thirty-five upon her wedding day, and Hinton was very proud and happy.

Angelica was one of the bridesmaids—Angelica, who was herself soon to take the part of bride. She and Seymour were to be wedded in July, and to go wandering in sunny lands during their bright honeymoon. Youth and love encircled their pathway, and a sunlit future unrolled itself before them.

"We shall be able to remember Leap Year, my darling, at all events. Our happiness will date from an exceptional year," said Seymour to his fair bride. "Do you think other couples are as happy as we are?"

"Certainly not!" laughed the blissful girl, stealing her hand into his, as they watched the gorgeous sun sink into the lilac and blue waves of the Mediterranean.

THE END.

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